THE GREEN GODDESS

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LOUISE JORDAN MILN

2/24

Frances Lyness

THE GREEN GODDESS

The Rajah upsets their well-laid plans to escape

(George Arliss' screen version "The Green Goddess")

The Green Goddess

By LOUISE JORDAN MILN

Author of
"Mr. Wu," "The Feast of Lanterns," "The Purple Mask," etc.

"And the Gods of the East made mouths at me."

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers New York

Published by arrangement with Frederick A. Stokes Company
Printed in U. S. A.

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Printed in the United States of America

"In men whom men proclaim divine,
I find so much of sin and blot,
In men whom men condemn as ill,
I find so much of goodness still;
I hesitate to draw the line
Between the two, where God has not."

THE GREEN GODDESS

CHAPTER I

THE Vicar was suffering—almost as much as he had suffered the night that Helen, his wife, had died—and *because* he was suffering he dressed his fine cameo-like face in its sunniest smile. That was his way—part of his creed-of-daily-life, an intrinsic part of his self.

A godly man, in the sweetest and strongest senses of that overused word, Philip Reynolds had a wholesome flair for the things of earth that both mellow human life and give it a tang. He liked his dinner, and he liked it good. He loved his roses, and he was vastly proud of his turnips. His modest cellar was admirably stocked. He enjoyed the logs that burned and glowed on his wide hearths. He was fond of his books —both inside and out. If he found a newly purchased book (he subscribed to no library) little worth reading, he discarded it. He gave it away, if he held it harmless; if he thought it a hurtful volume, he burned it. But his taste was broad, and his charity—to books as well as to people—was wide. He played a good hand of bridge—though Lucilla, his girl, played even a better. But he could beat the county at whist, and most of it at chess. He still could give a crack tennis player a game, and he could ride neck and neck with the next —and so could Lucilla.

But all these things were so much to him only because they that he loved were so greatly more. There were four big human loves in his being and keeping. Three whom he loved were out in the churchyard—only one, Lucilla, still lived. But he loved the three as actively now as he had when they had been here in the vicarage with him. And the creature things he cared for and cultivated—wine, food, games, flowers, books—he cared for and appreciated most because he associated them with the beings of his strong living love: his mother, his wife, Jack, his boy, and Lucilla, his daughter.

He had one great friendship, and two or three more moderate, but staunch and warm. His great friendship was with God. It amounted to reverent intimacy. He felt more quickly alive to God's nearness than to that of most human creatures. His friendship with God filled his life. But his human loves filled his heart. Philip Reynolds loved his God, and obeyed Him loyally and gladly. But he knew that his love for the three in the churchyard, and the girl whom he was giving up to another to-morrow was a more passionate thing than the devoted affection he gave to his Maker and Master. And he dared to think this no offense to the Supreme. God who had granted them to him understood and did not blame, he thought.

He had no doubt of God's personal existence, and never had had. As a little child he had believed implicitly because his mother did, and as he grew older, and came to live—as we all, even the most heart-bound and interknit with close human intimacies must—a life somewhat of his own, all that he saw, experienced, and came to think added a strong and vivid conviction, a reasoned and constantly augmented conviction, to what

had been just acceptance and credulity. Everything convinced him that there was a God, a gracious, humane and intensely personal God, in whose image all men were made. The marvelous, masterly plan of the universe, the exquisite creation of flowers, the flight and the song of birds, the fitness and interfitting of all natural and unspoiled things, the unerring instincts of animal life and of the vegetable world—instincts of reproduction and of self-defending; these and a myriad other daily "miracles" convinced him of a Master Workman omnipotent and very near; gave him a conviction which never could be shaken or threatened—an invincible, glowing, grateful faith. And it was his strength. But his human loves were his inspiration; they flowed through his being like rare wine in his veins, they colored his life, sparkled his thought, and perfumed his world. He *knew* God, and worshiped Him, and gave Him a beautiful friendship. But his love, as he understood "love"—life's earthly stimulant and elixir—was for the three in the churchyard and for the girl their going had left with him behind them.

A son never had loved a mother more than Philip Reynolds had loved his; but she held the fourth place in his heart. Helen, his wife, had held the first, and after her he had loved Jack, their boy. Jack had died almost immediately after Helen's death, and Reynolds, because he so exquisitely and deeply loved Helen, rejoiced more than he grieved. He was glad to have Jack forever safe in their Father-God's keeping, radiantly glad that Helen should have the boy's companionship and keeping in that near Heaven where she waited his coming. The parishioners marveled at their Vicar's sunny serenity close on the loss of his only son; one or two questioned it, even, not too approvingly.

Other priests held it his very great "grace." But they were wrong, for it was no saintship, but simply the supreme sincerity of his love of his wife, making him *glad* to give to her what he most of all things would have wished to keep for himself: the daily and constant companionship of Jack. And yet—were they wrong after all? Surely to love as this man loved *is* "grace," a grace unto the grace of the Kingdom of Heaven.

His wife, his son, and his mother were as much an active part of his daily life to-day as they ever had been; and Jack, the last to be laid there, had lain in the old Surrey churchyard a full score of years. Each day he went to their graves which no hand but his ever tended—it was not far to go; only across the narrow country road—saw that their flowers were fresh, and the bleakest winter's day they had their flowers, and passed on in to pray in the church where his mother and he and Jack had been christened, and where his mother and Helen and he had been married—then back to his home and his people, his tireless, gentle ministering to good and to sinful, his sipping of good wine, his reading of books, his games and his writing, and his care of Lucilla.

He could not remember his father; for the father had "gone down with his ship" when Philip had been but a baby; and Lucilla could remember neither her mother nor brother; for they had died when she was not three.

Helen Reynolds was still remembered in the parish for her pretty face, and her soft kind ways—remembered as "a nice little thing" with the best heart in the world, but no special strength of mind or of will.

But that had not been so. Few women have ever

had a stronger will, and even fewer a more capable mind. Her intense gentleness had been a dignity, not weakness. An entirely happy life had left her will unruffled, and her really fine mind had been homekeeping, a trifle proud, and more than a trifle scornful of the mental equipments—outside of the vicarage itself—about her. A great many rich and leisured people—quite a few of them with minor titles—had smart country establishments in the purlieus of her husband's parish, but they were not intellectuals, they read more novels than quarterlies, attended more race-meetings than academic lectures, were more steeped in fashions than in philosophies, and the village folk were true to type, self-seeking, self-absorbed, gossipy, curious, ordinary. They read the Surrey *Comet*—some of them sometimes—abused the weather, asked alms directly or indirectly, but industriously, of Vicar and Squire, and took a keen rather than gracious interest in each other's births and marriages, ups and downs, debts and earnings, shortcomings and Sunday dinners. They had not interested Helen Reynolds; which was not altogether to their disadvantage. For the Vicar's wife had a shrewder gift of analysis than the Vicar had. He saw chiefly the good in every one. She saw the bad, as quickly and surely as she did the good; and her sense of justice leaned to severity rather than to mercy. She had been as devoted to Philip as he to her. But he had deserved it. A faulty husband would have had short shrift with Helen Reynolds, whose "sweetly pretty" face and soft, rippling, girlish hair enhoused a relentless judgment, an exigeant taste and unwavering determination. But she had a sweet, sunny spirit and a quick, bubbling sense of humor. She rarely smiled,

but she laughed fairly often. And her wit was both pretty and trenchant.

The Vicar never made a joke in his life, and never failed to see one—and, if it really was good, never failed to enjoy it greatly.

There was more lion, more indomitability, in wife than in husband, but they were excellently matched in tastes, culture and breeding; and their comradeship had been "perfect and entire, wanting nothing." And death did not separate them.

The daughter of such parents and of such a marriage came into life with fine equipment. She had her mother's mind, the good taste of the two, a person less "pretty," more distinguished than her mother's. She had her mother's cool, clear head, her father's big, loyal heart, her mother's sharp eyes, her father's fine, firm hand on bridle or reins. She had his genial liking of people, his love of fun, her mother's resentment of all that offended her taste, the tireless limbs of them both, the flair of adventure and travel that they had shared almost equally. She was fearless and exquisitely bred.

Philip Reynolds had traveled much in his younger days, and he still roamed the world—in his study and in the easy chair by the drawing-room fire. But since his wife's death he had not spent a night out of the sleeping-room that had also been hers. He still loved to travel—with the book on his knee; but not for all the wonder-spots of earth would he have foregone even once his daily tryst at the graves in the churchyard.

Lucilla Reynolds always had longed to travel, but had done it but little. For her own sake her father had been unwilling to spare her—for they had few relatives, and none to whom he cared to entrust his girl often. But he was relinquishing her now. And

she was going to travel far. For Captain Crespin's regiment was stationed in India. And they were to be married to-morrow, Antony Crespin and Lucilla Reynolds.

CHAPTER II

THE Vicar was suffering acutely. He knew he'd miss his daughter. And he thought he should not see her again after to-morrow's parting. So he went into the breakfast-room, where he knew she'd be waiting for him as she always was, wearing his brightest face. No shadow of his making should dim the child's last day at home with her father. There would be time enough—all the rest of his life—to miss her in, and he did not intend to do it to-day, in the least, or to anticipate it. This should be a day of great and unbroken joy. And he didn't intend to mope after she'd gone. Not he! He had the churchyard, his people to shepherd, the flowers in his garden, and good-fellow books on his shelves, and his one great Friendship. And he was brave.

It was hard to let the child go—that of course—but the way of her going contented him well. From the hour of her birth he had prayed that Lucilla might marry. The new dispensation that made life so much more interesting and varied for unmarried women had his cordial endorsement, because it did, as he judged, make the world a pleasanter place for an unmarried woman; but he was profoundly and acutely sure that marriage was for every woman "the better part," and in the increasing preponderance of women to-day, making marriage a mathematical impossibility for so awkwardly many, his prayer that his girl should marry took on an unplacid quality of anxiety, almost a cer-

tain feverishness that he owned to himself was less than becoming to so spiritual an act as prayer.

He was glad when love found Lucilla out, and marriage beckoned and claimed her. He liked and approved Antony Crespin. And he rejoiced that her marriage was to take so far afield the daughter whose actual presence he could so ill spare, and would, he knew, so sorely miss. He knew that she—for all her sweet and unaffected happiness in it—had begun to find the quiet, beaten Surrey path a trifle tame, a little same and narrow. Because she was going so far, he thought that he should not see her again; but he was glad that she was. India would fascinate her, he thought; and the army life would amuse her. And of her happiness and welfare he had no doubt; for Crespin was good all through, a sterling, capable fellow, and Lucilla herself was as sane and sensible as she was true and sweet. Antony had beyond his Captain's beggarly pay, though a bit less beggarly in an Indian regiment, of course, a decent private income; not too much, but just enough. The prayer of Agar would be answered for the husband and wife, and Philip Reynolds was sure that "Grant me neither poverty nor riches" was one of the most sensible petitions ever lifted up to God by man. Yes—it was a good match in every sense. And, if to-morrow would be one of his sharp sorrow-days, it too would be one of his gladdest.

Lucilla stood quietly radiant waiting for him at the breakfast table.

"Well, Daddy?" she said.

"Well, dear?"

"Sleep well?"

"Capitally! Capitally!"

It was their usual morning greeting. Then he kissed

her, and she kissed him, as kindly and gently as he had in that same room, on that same spot every morning for years—but no more warmly, no more lingeringly than they always had; with no added significance. Each had resolved that to-day should be just like other days of theirs, to be cherished in memory all the more tenderly because it had been just one of their days of ordinary intimacy. And, though nothing had been said between them, each knew that they shared the wish and the intention.

Her boxes were packed and locked—all packed, all locked, but the one into which her wedding white would be laid when she came back from church to-morrow. All that he had to say to her, advice, careful words about marriage and about India, some of it said for himself, some said in her mother's stead, assurances that he would do capitally, capitally without her, promises to neglect neither her collie nor her carnations—all this had been said. None of it need be said again. Nothing should be allowed to mark this day from the many other good days they had shared together—except that each had told the parlor-maid privately that they would be at home to no one to-day—if any one had the ill tact to call; and as for the villagers, well, if any parishioners were in sudden trouble or sickness they must shift with the curate for once.

Not even Antony Crespin was to have admittance to-day, Lucilla had told him, and Crespin had laughed, and understood, with a tender look in his pleasant eyes, and had promised obedience with a cheerful "Right-o!"

The girl gave her father his coffee, and he gave her her kidneys.

She teased him a little when his cup came back the second time, and he retorted with a reminder of what

it probably had cost when she helped herself to a second peach.

For more than an hour they strolled in the garden, as they always did when it was fine, and often, though more briskly and briefly, when it rained. They studied the roses and appraised the peas, counted the chickens just hatched—one perking about with a white bubble of shell still on its soft yellow back—praised the red wealth of the strawberry beds, shook their heads at a pear tree's blight; but nothing was said of that they would not do it together again. All over the garden they wandered, her hand on his sleeve, or his on hers; but they did this almost every day.

When they went in he read his paper and she read hers.

After lunch they went back into the garden, he with a book, she with some sewing, and under the big cedar just outside the drawing-room's open French window he sat in the big garden chair and read aloud, while she sat on the big bench and worked.

She played to him after tea. Then he read her the sermon he'd finished the night before while she and Antony had roamed the garden, and Lucilla made a suggestion or two—as she often did, more because she knew he liked her to than for any more critical reason—and one suggestion he liked and incorporated, and one he disdained and rejected.

They had a fire in the hall that night, as they always did when its heat possibly could be borne. He won the game of cribbage; he usually did. Then she sat on the wide hearth-curb, leaning back against the ingle-nook's paneling, her palms behind her head, and he lounged in his great cushioned chair, and their lazy talk moved back and forth from grave to gay.

The grandfather's clock struck eleven. The Vicar got up and wound it, she standing beside him. Then without a word he kissed her goodnight, and patted her shoulder, and she kissed him, and said, "Till breakfast, Daddy. Remember to put this light out," and went up the broad, old stairs, her pale dinner-gown trailing softly behind her. And her father stood and watched her—not moving until he had heard her bedroom door close.

Lucilla Reynolds closed her door—alone with the thoughts that such girls think on such nights.

And the man sat alone by the fire till it died.

CHAPTER III

OUT on the ocean Lucilla Crespin missed her father more than he, alone now in the vicarage, missed her. He had been bereaved too often to feel overwhelming or insupportable shock from bereavement, and he was at home with his house, his books, his garden, his people, his usual work and his usual pastimes, with his church and his churchyard—and, above all, at home with himself.

Lucilla was scarcely at home yet with her new self—that was the chief difference—and she was out on the new, unbeaten paths now, crossing the wide world, alone on the ocean, alone for the rest of the long years to come with a stranger—a devoted and perfectly charming stranger, who loved her amazingly, and whom she loved excitingly—but a stranger. She had felt so closely acquainted with her lover, even before he had spoken his love, but she found that she felt oddly and shyly unacquainted with her husband. It was fascinating, the queer strangeness she felt, and it made the smallest, ordinary, everyday things wonderful, almost hairbreadth-escape adventure—changing her shoes, fastening a blouse, winding her watch, washing her hands. But it was a strangeness. Antony was wonderfully good to her, beautifully considerate. She found something new to like in him every day, and discovered, almost as often, some unexpected trait or attainment to admire. She told him so shyly one evening, and he laughed with his face against hers.

"'Tis not a year or two shows us a man,'" he told her teasingly.

And, "So I begin to suspect," his wife retorted.

She was very happy. The ocean and the sky above it did not seem large enough to hold her happiness; and, as for her own heart, it ached sometimes with the throb and the crowding of her new joy. But she missed her father sorely, and each mile farther from England she missed him the more.

The boat was full of Anglo-Indians, of course, a few going out for the first time to take up new appointments, boys with their first commissions, men exchanging into Indian regiments, civil servants; but for the most, service folk and civil servants returning from leave. Lucilla noticed that they grumbled a deal at the heat and the "grind" they were going back to, but it seemed to her as she listened, keenly interested in even stray words that might tell her something of the new world in which she was going to live, that their grumbling was more a convention than a sincerity, and that they one and all were looking forward to India as what one happy-faced subaltern frankly called it, "a jolly good spree—what." There were two or three globe-trotters aboard, an isolated and cold-shouldered missionary, and three or four business men. But these scarcely tinged the gathering, for none of them in the least penetrated into the "service" fold. It was almost a secret society the "service" people formed, she found; and certainly a jealously kept and guarded caste, and the army people sat on the higher seats.

If Mrs. Crespin was proud of her good-looking, soldierly husband, Captain Crespin was openly vain of his tall, handsome, girlish wife. And because he was vain of her he genially encouraged the acquaintance that soon buzzed about her.

The women admired her frocks, and the men ad-

mired her eyes and the way she walked, and both women and men liked her for her fresh girlishness. And, if some of the women envied her it, not one of them did it cattishly; and several, already sallowed from long Indian years, pitied her too, knowing that what India had done to their skins it probably would do to hers. And it takes a very sour woman, and a woman a little bad at core, to feel unkindness towards a bride.

Lucilla Crespin looked younger than her twenty years, and, tall as she was, securely as she carried herself, girlishness was her most instantly and insistently obvious point. Many a country priest's motherless daughter—especially an only daughter—looks and seems very much older than her years. But in no sense had Mrs. Crespin ever been "her father's curate," or the villagers' "mother." Parochial administration and fad-philanthropy had never attracted her, and she had firmly left them alone. They had not sat too heavily on Philip Reynolds himself, and had shadowed the Vicar but little, and had shadowed the vicarage life and Lucilla not at all. He was always readier with half-crowns than with soup or jellies, and he prayed for his flock more than he fussed it.

He, not Lucilla, had been the housekeeper. He had a flair for housekeeping, and she had not. He engaged the servants, arranged the menus as a rule, paid the bills and planned hospitalities. Lucilla had had an ample allowance—Reynolds liked things well done, and he perfectly knew that that required money—but she never exceeded, rarely spent, all of it, and more often than not consulted her father about the color and material of a new frock. The result had justified her—if it had not altogether fitted her for the selection of

her own wardrobe which lay before her now. It was thanks chiefly to the Reverend Philip Reynolds that the women on the big P. and O. so admired young Mrs. Crespin's gowns. He had taken far more interest in Lucilla's trousseau than she had—and it had cost him a great deal of money. Little as she knew of money, the bills for that trousseau would have appalled Lucilla, if she ever had seen them; but they had warmed the Vicar's heart like good wine, and he wrote the checks with a glowing face, and with a complacent flourish at the end of his scholarly signature. There would not be a great deal to leave his girl at his death, but he had no wish that they should have a very great deal; and Antony had enough. And Helen's modest inheritance was secure for Lucilla.

All this had kept Lucilla Reynolds very young. She had had few tasks, and no burdens. She never had gone to school. She had had expensive and highly efficient governesses—the best that large salaries, great care, and the Vicar's good sense and fine taste could procure: estimable women who also were charming. But none of them had lived at the vicarage. Lured from London and Paris, one of the conditions of their engagement always had been that they should find for themselves or allow Mr. Reynolds to find for them apartments at a reasonable distance from the vicarage, but by no means close to its gates. Their holidays had been long, and their teaching hours rather short. They had had no sinecure—the Vicar knew the value of money, and always insisted upon getting the value of his—but none of Lucilla Reynolds' governesses had been overworked. And none of them had been encouraged to "mother" the girl, and certainly none of them had had any reason to regard as the most re-

mote possibility a translation from governess to stepmother. They had been handsomely paid to teach, and so wisely had they been chosen that they had done it handsomely. They had loved the girl too; and she had liked them all, but she had loved none of them. Lucilla Crespin had felt love but twice: love for her father, and love for the soldier who was taking her with him to India now. And she scarcely had had a girl friend. If this last had narrowed her, it too had preserved her. It had made her a poor hand at some sorts of "small talk," but it had kept her mind fresh and undiscolored.

Philip Reynolds had "formed" his girl himself, he and the books he had shared with her and the environment he had given her. And her actual "education" he had officered even more than any of her paid teachers had. Had their wills ever clashed or their tastes jarred, such constant companionship might have rasped the girl. But their wills had been one, and their tastes had too. Best of all, for her welfare, she never had been able to feel for her father less than absolute respect. And she had always had to be proud of him. She had never found her home life dull, for the father had been a perfect playmate. It was small wonder that she, whose girlhood had been so guarded, but never stagnant, and had been so companioned—so rarely companioned—*was* younger than her years—and seemed even younger than she was. It was no wonder at all that she missed her father. She missed him terribly.

There were a number of men and several women on board whom Captain Crespin had known in India, had met in the hills, at Calcutta and in leaves in Kashmir;

but none of his regiment, or of his own station in the Punjab. But at Malta two brother officers, returning from a shorter leave than his, joined the ship. As a matter of course they "chummed up" with the Crespins and Crespin with them.

They had heard of his marriage, and were not a little anxious to know just what manner of girl was coming "on to their strength." There were only four women in the regiment—that is, actually in the station—just now, and in the small station there was no other regiment, and no social life whatever beyond what the regiment made for itself. Where the women were so few it was distinctly important what manner of women they were: how much to be liked, how far congenial and helpful. Two of the ladies already with the regimental colors were dearly loved by every man in it; two were not. The new Mrs. Crespin would make the preponderance for social comfort or discomfort. Which? Bruce and Crossland wondered. They didn't say so to each other, of course. India's a gossipy place—Anglo-India—and in the Punjabi dearth even the soldier-men "talk" over their tobacco. But only the "bounders" ever discuss the women folk of brother officers, and there are very few bounders commissioned into the British army, and the few that are are rather apt to drift out: they are apt to find that there is not comfortable room for them in their regiment.

Crossland and Bruce had never so much as hinted to each other their hope and their fear as to how far Crespin's wife might sweeten or bitter their next few years. But both knew that (and what) both were hoping and fearing somewhat acutely.

The sun was setting over Valetta as the great P.

and O. swung and throbbed back to her course. Malta lay rose and gold in the sunset, the Church of St. John looked gold inlaid with pink and amber, the old *auberges* where the Knights once kept their palaced state sparkled red and gold in the heat of the sun's dying radiance, and the exquisite high-walled little gardens looked chips of garnet, emerald and topaz, and even the carob-trees and prickly pears in the sparcer bare and rocky valleys were jeweled and gay in the waning splendor. Back of and over the city of Valetta, with its queer, steep, twisted streets and its picturesque and magnificent buildings—more flowers, more great and varied architecture, and more human beings and homes are packed into Malta's teeming ninety-five square miles than are in the same space anywhere else—hung the sunset's gorgeous curtain of ever-changing amethyst and gold, crimson and rose and apple-green and fire-shot lemon, and here in front of the island at her feet the great blue ocean rippled and spread like a tremulous carpet woven of blue and green gems.

And this was the background against which, when they came on to the deck, after hastily changing for dinner, Bruce and Crossland first saw their regiment's latest recruit—Captain Crespin's girl-wife.

The Crespins too already were dressed to dine, and she, in her soft frock of delicate blue, with touches here and there of vivid green velvet, which the Vicar had proudly pronounced "most happy," an inch of silvery gray fur at its fluted hem, a great bunch of saffron and lemon roses, that Crespin had bought her in Valetta's fragrant flower market, in her hands, and a rose—one of the deep ones—at her breast, and loosely over her hair the shawl of black Maltese lace that Antony too had bought as they wandered about the old,

once Phœnician town of the Hospitalers, looked for all her palpably English tea-rose face not unlike some exquisite Maltese.

They were standing by the rail, watching the sunset city—the Crespins—but Antony was more particularly watching her, his face turned a little towards the deck, and he saw his brother officers, and hailed them.

When he introduced them to "my wife," Bruce, forgetting it was for her to grant it, if she chose, not for him to ask it, impulsively held out his hand—after all she was one of *them* now—and Lucilla instantly and cordially gave him hers; and when he let it go, not too quickly, she held it out with a pretty friendly gesture, half girlish, half matronly to Dr. Crossland, and said to them both, "How jolly! I thought I should have to wait until we got to Sumnee before I knew any of you. This is ever so much nicer." And her big blue eyes, deep and clear as sapphires, but softer under their curled fringe of long dark lashes, said shyly, "Please like me."

"By Jove, Mrs. Crespin"—she was not very used yet to being called so, and she flushed deliciously, and a dimple trembled at one corner of her bow-shaped red mouth—"By Jove, it is ripping of you to say so," Bruce stammered delightedly. And Crossland looked what Bruce had said.

They saw without looking the relief in each other's faces.

Crespin saw it too, and laughed aloud.

"What is it?" Lucilla demanded.

"Ask them," Antony chuckled, and sauntered off, leaving the three alone.

"What was Tony laughing at?" the girl persisted.

Dr. Crossland smiled sagely, but shook his head decidedly.

"I'll tell you some day, if I dare, Mrs. Crespin," Bruce promised her. "Wouldn't dare tell you now, don't you know. My hat, I'm glad we've hopped on to your boat—no end a *tamasha* we'll have getting out to our 306-in-the-shade paradise. I say, don't you let Crespin give us the slip in Calcutta, will you?"

"Why *did* he laugh? What was funny? Do tell me."

But neither man would do that.

But they each fell very industriously to making particularly good friends with Antony Crespin's wife.

And that night in the stateroom they shared each made a cryptic remark, one to his hair-brush, one to the shoe he kicked off.

"Thank the Lord!" Tom Bruce told his shoe audibly.

George Crossland, under his breath said to his brush, frowning at it, "Poor girl!"

CHAPTER IV

"SHALL I like India, Captain Bruce?"

"Sure to—all women do. But you'll jolly well hate Sumnee. It's the jumping-off place."

"Shall I?" Mrs. Crespin repeated, turning a little to Crossland.

"Like India, Mrs. Crespin? Most women do, more than like it. Bruce is right there. But I'm not sure about you."

"Why?"

"You are different," he said simply.

"Why shall I dislike Sumnee?" she asked them both.

"Good Lord!" Bruce answered.

"My hat!" Crossland said.

"As bad as all that?" Lucilla said gayly.

"Worse," they both answered her instantly.

"Why didn't you tell me, Tony?" Mrs. Crespin asked severely.

"You mightn't have come," her husband told her, "and I rather wanted you to."

Lucilla blushed.

"Don't mind us," Bruce said encouragingly.

Dr. Crossland looked out over the water.

But it was to him that she said, "Please tell me about Sumnee."

"Well," he began, "it's hot."

"Of course," Lucilla interrupted him scornfully, "it's India. Even I know that. Even in Surrey we have heard that it is warm in the Punjab."

"You have heard no lie," Bruce said stoutly. "Surrey! Good Lord—to be in Surrey when the marrow's in bloom and the cabbage in fruit, and the starch stands to its collar! Hot! Hot isn't the word."

"It is not," Crespin agreed.

"Is Sumnee so *very* hot, Dr. Crossland?"

"Scorching!"

"Go on," she prompted.

"Well—there's nothing to tell—really there isn't. There's nothing to describe, because there's nothing there. There's scarcely a tree."

"I shall make a garden at once, if we haven't one."

"You will not," Bruce murmured.

"Go on, Dr. Crossland. There must be something to tell me."

"And there isn't a decent house."

"But there must be. We don't live in tents, do we?"

"We live in mud huts," Bruce said softly, "and live on goat."

"But roast kid is perfect. Daddy and I particularly like it."

"In Sumnee it is—imperfect," Bruce remarked grimly.

But though they railed, Lucilla Crespin caught a warm undercurrent of affection, of pleasant memories and zesty anticipations in the raillery. Every woman owns to liking India greatly; most men pose as disliking it—while they are there; but ask the Anglo-Indian "home now for good," when you run across him in the Strand, just there at Charing Cross where we all meet each other sooner or later—and he'll tell you, if he's English-honest, that he is *homesick* for India, rains, droughts, natives and all; and watch the face of the long-service Anglo-Indian going home

for the last time, going home to inheritance, increased fortune and ease perhaps—watch his face and his eyes as the P. and O. or troop-ship pulls off from Bombay or Madras or down the Hugli, and he takes his long last look at the sweltering East! You will not need to ask him.

They were having afternoon tea on deck, Malta two days behind them—the sun-awnings were up now, and ices were served at eleven and three—and Crespin said as he held his cup up for her to fill it again, "Never mind, Lu, you *shall* have a garden of sorts, and these blighters shall dig it, while you and I sit under the veranda punkah and eat mango-ices and stone-cold pumelos. You shall have all the comfy home things, every one of them. And perhaps you won't quite hate poor old rotten Sumnee. I shall like Sumnee *now*."

"You, you lucky beggar—of course you will. Who wouldn't, in your shoes?" Bruce grumbled. "But perhaps we'll like it better too—now—" he added more cheerfully. "And we'll teach you how to play parlor polo, and how to make toothsome *chupatties* out of mud and cocoanut fat, and how to eat mangoes without a bib on, and, if you'll let us, come to tea every day, and tiffin on Sundays, and dinner quite often, we'll give you curly daggers and beetle-work lace curtains and bunches of cactus dahlias and crushed torquoise things from the Vale of Kashmir, Lucknow enamels —fish-pattern ones, Bokhara cloths, Poona trays, Benares brass-work, Deccan snakes (tin, not live ones) and peacock-feather fans, thousands and thousands of peacock feathers, painted leather Bikanir vases and glass bangles, and tin toe-rings to make your drawing-room beautiful."

"But, you mustn't," Lucilla Crespin told him firmly. "I intend our home to be absolutely English. There shall not be even one thing in it that isn't quite English, not one that hasn't come from home."

"Right-o!" Bruce consented. "We'll forgive you, so long as you ask us to tea every day and tiffin on Sundays, and dinner very often. And you and I will sit on the veranda under the punkah, and eat mango-ices and chilled pumelos, while Crespin and Crossland dig your garden and swear at each other."

"I shall not have a punkah," Mrs. Crespin said severely. "I shall have nothing, I tell you, that we do not have at home. Our home is going to be an English home."

"You'll have a punkah, dear," said Crespin softly. "You'll have several."

"My hat, you will!" Bruce exclaimed. "And you'll have a few other things that are not strictly English —what. White ants in the sugar, silver-fish and lizards—single spies and whole battalions of them—on your walls and out for a ride on the train of your dinner-gown, and centipedes, and cheetahs grinning in at the windows, jackals serenading you every night, and goat to eat, I repeat, which will *not* taste like infant Southdown, *and* native servants. You may like the native servants, and you may not. It's a matter of taste."

But Lucilla only laughed. "I'm not afraid, Captain Bruce," she said. "You can't frighten me."

Crossland said nothing, but he studied the waves gravely as they foamed and beat at each other in ocean play, and his eyes were cloudy. So another English woman was coming to India to live in it apart from its peoples and beauties and wisdoms—to hold

her skirts aside from India. He thought it a pity. He'd seen it so often—and he believed it the most dangerous of the several rocks upon which the ship of Empire might some day split and go down.

CHAPTER V

LUCILLA CRESPIN did not like Sumnee. She liked her life there fairly well. She loved her home there. She loved Antony. She liked some of his friends. She loved her happiness, and nourished and cherished it. She liked the English Club measurably; she liked the tennis court palely—it was better than none, but it was a poor imitation of tennis courts in Surrey. She did make a garden, verbenas in flowerpots mostly, and she tried to like it; and when they came she worshiped her babies. But she did not like Sumnee. She did not even like India.

But she was happy in Sumnee. Not every one can be happy in a place they dislike; but there are some so equipped for happiness that they can find, or, not finding, make it, almost anywhere, and it requires far less personal balance and natural joyousness than Lucilla had, to be happy in London (or even in Berlin) when one would far rather live in New York, if one is young, radiantly well, comfortably pursed (one *can* buy a deal of happiness) and loves and is loved. Mrs. Crespin was happy in Sumnee—at first. And the years passed. But her years taught her much that "her days never knew"—for a while.

It is said that all English women like India, and very much like living there. Most of them do—but there are exceptions.

Two classes of European women like and enjoy India very much: the first and greatly preponderant

class are the have-a-good-time ones, by no means bad sorts, as a rule, but brave, gay things who like to wear frilly white gowns, and give much time and care to dressing their hair, tree their boots and slippers and shoes, read "The Queen" and "La Monde" (if they can, and if they can't, study its plates), and are particularly proud of their afternoon tea-table pretties of silver and lace. They like the punkahs, the abundance of servants—servants who rarely "give notice," and never sulk—mango-ices and picnics by moonlight. They even enjoy making both ends meet—no one too much minds being poor in the East; at least, if one has some sort of entrée to Government House, and one's man's in the Army. Viceroys are not poor, as a rule—they would find it inconvenient, for big as their "screw" is, it isn't enough; but Commanders-in-Chief have been poor enough before now, and, if one has to skimp, one has the satisfaction of doing it in the best of company, and in the best good-fellowship in the world. But there are women—the have-a-good-time-and-take-care-of-your-man ones—who like India but never know or sense it. Young Mrs. Crespin was not one of these, but she had several of their insular traits, and lived no little of their life. The other class (it is very small) are caught by the lure of the real India. Its story appeals to them, its peoples and its myriad wonders and beauties. They feel her marvel. And they catch the throb of her heart beneath the impenetrable mask, and respond and are grateful. Mrs. Crespin was not one of these.

There is a third class—a very powerful and beautiful class, which includes some of the other two: women who follow the drum, sometimes to Simla and

other pleasant, cool hill places, sometimes to desolate, sun-baked spots where the ice often gives out, and nothing ever happens, and who take it all, and the make-shifts of outlandish frontier stations with quiet good humor; women whose courage and unselfishness are very fine, and very womanly. They are a great racial asset, the strength and the solace of their men folk; and, if they spared of the devotion they lavish on those same British soldier-men one tithe to the brown human peoples that live about them, and minister to them so loyally, they would be a greater asset of permanent and successful Empire than any in Whitehall.

One of these Lucilla might have been—she shaped towards it at first—but circumstances (fate, if you like) balked it.

India, great gold and rose India, marbled, carved, mosaicked, caravaned, with its bazaars and temples and its lonely peasant huts, its seas of quivering bamboo and its music of glass and silver bangles and anklets, its beautiful naked, plump *butchas,* its sacred *purdahs,* its mingled perfumes of lotus and wild yellow hyacinths, of pink jasmine and red, red roses, its dark-eyed, wrinkled, patient cattle with ropes of marigold slung between their snow-white and cream-colored humps, its storied rivers—and the Himalayas, might have appealed to her as the Vicar had thought it would, could she have seen it with him, or in other guidance as cordial and fit. But she saw it through the dry choking dust of a hot, arid, flat Punjabi station, sensed it through the chatter of an English Club—and, so, neither saw nor sensed it at all. She never touched its people. Her syce was merely a servant, so

impersonal that she never knew or asked his name, her house servants were nothing to her but "boys," and even the ayah who tended upon her deftly and faithfully, and saved her baby's life when croup and convulsions nearly killed it, was only an ayah. Mrs. Crespin, as sweet at heart as the roses in the Surrey vicarage garden, never knew her ayah's name, never thought of her as having one, never knew where she lived, what she ate, or thought, or believed; never wondered what were her joys and sorrows, never wondered if she ever had ache or pain; never knew, or cared to know, whether the native woman was married or not, or widowed, or whether she had a child of her own.

But she was happy at Sumnee—at first. She had Antony, and Antony was enough.

Her homesickness never quite ceased to ache, and she missed riding and games. She had both at Sumnee, but both were poor substitutes for those she had at "home." Always athletic, she was not fully satisfied at playing at sports, and gymkanas bored her almost as much as church bazaars had, and the Vicar of Oxlea always had rather discouraged church bazaars. Womanly, yet she was not a woman's woman —and life in an out-of-the-way one-regiment station in the plains is apt to be hard on a woman who does not greatly care for feminine society, but has no coquetry in her. But she had Antony, and she was happy, and when the promise of motherhood pulsed she was more than happy. And, if many of her hours were alone ones, she had many books, and she read hour after hour almost every day.

Twice the Yule-log burned on her bungalow hearth —great chunks of fragrant deodar that Lucilla gar-

landed with ribbons; the heat they made in December in the plains was appalling, but Lucilla Crespin would not keep Christmas without them. And they ate their plum-pudding hot and flaming; and there's no dearth of holly in India, if you know where to send for it. Twice her Yule-log burned on her bungalow hearth. And then the crash came.

CHAPTER VI

ARMISTICE DAY and its solemn celebrations had passed—but not its deep thanksgiving—when the regiment was ordered to Dehra Dun, a more interesting, less narrowed station in itself and less service-bound. There was civilian life in Dehra Dun, and Mrs. Crespin was not sorry to know a few civilians again. She made several interesting such acquaintances there, and the most interesting of them all turned out to be an old schoolmate of Major Crespin's.

The Great War had irked Crespin—because in it he had been debarred from the active service he craved to be sent on in Europe, or even in Egypt or Mesopotamia, and had been kept relentlessly in India —and hurt him as only a soldierly soldier can be hurt, and by that one thing: having to "stand-by" and do the "damned cushy" jobs, when other chaps—"lucky devils"—were losing legs and eyes and lives in Flanders and Gallipoli—but also it incidentally made him a Major, and a really fine wireless expert.

He did his "bit," of course, and he did it well. But who did not do their bit from the August of 1914 till Armistice Day, and a little longer! He did his bit, but he chafed and swore, and came near breaking his heart.

Basil Traherne—the celebrated Dr. Traherne now —and Antony Crespin had been at Harrow together, fag and fag-master. But they had not met since, and Crespin seemed less glad to reencounter his one-

time fag than might have been natural; for Traherne had been a good and a devoted fag, and the boys had been really good friends.

But—there—that was over twenty years ago—Crespin was thirty-eight now, and Traherne was thirty-three—and a good deal changes in most of us, as well as around us, in twenty years. And friendships that never are fed by so much as a letter must be the exceptional friendships of very exceptional people, if they lose nothing in twenty years. How many ever have?

Mrs. Crespin liked Traherne immediately, and he returned her liking cordially—and was grateful for it. And Major Crespin was more glad to have the physician "amuse the wife" than he was to see much of him himself, or with anything of an old intimacy that time had shrunk and withered.

Traherne interested Lucilla Crespin at once—they seemed to like and to dislike (a surer test of sympathy) the same people, things and books. And when she heard that he not only was the perhaps greatest living authority on malaria, and certainly the coming doctor-man as far as Oriental disease was concerned, but also was "mad on flying," was no mean pilot, and had a "bus" of his own, she actually clapped her hands, and said, "Oh, Dr. Traherne—I never have been—*will* you take me up?"

And several men, Colonel Agnew among them, who saw and heard, who always had known that she was decidedly good-looking, discovered for the first time that she was positively lovely. And the Colonel was vastly pleased that "Crespin's wife had found something to wake her up again, something to interest her, don't you know, and make a fad of. Every woman

needs a fad—such a safety-valve and pick-me-up to 'em, God bless 'em, as polo, or whist or the *Times* is to us, by Jove."

Colonel Agnew—Crespin's C. O.—had a cold blue eye, a terrible temper, as curry-hot as any in Anglo-India (you can't say more than that), and a heart of soft warm gold. He admired Mrs. Crespin more than any woman he knew, and loved her almost as much as he did Kathleen, his own motherless girl. He wouldn't have liked her so well if his wife, who had not died until two years after Lucilla joined the regiment, had not liked her very much indeed, and approved her warmly, and if Kathleen did not—and he was no worse a man and no worse a soldier for that. But he was not cut very strictly to pattern in it, or in several other respects. He held Mrs. Crespin very high. And he was fatherly-fond of her. And he was grateful to her. At first he had warmed to her because he felt that she, and her good-looks and poise, did the regiment credit. Then he had liked her for her more intimate self, and because Mary and Kathleen did. To do the regiment the smallest good-turn, to enhance it in any way directly or indirectly, was for Colonel Agnew instantly to write himself down very much in your debt: if you were a small drummer boy who drummed well and loyally, a *matranee* who swept the sergeant's mess out as a sergeant's mess should be swept, or a visiting general who gave the men and officers their due. Too, Agnew was grateful to Mrs. Crespin for a service not exactly regimental; for it was she who under God had coaxed Kathleen back into her senses when that blithering young ass Bob Grant had made such a silly goat of himself—before Colonel Agnew had contrived a way to get the

fool transferred. The old soldier felt that he owed Mrs. Crespin more than he could hope ever to pay. And he had been sore at heart over her this many a day now. And when he saw her eyes sparkle, and her old rose color come at Traherne's "flying" talk, he vowed hotly then and there (but not aloud) that she should "go up," if she liked, and as often as she liked, and he was damned if Crespin should prevent it.

But Major Crespin had no wish to do that. He was only too glad to have any pleasure fall to his wife. And so Mrs. Crespin went up with Traherne, and very much more than once. Crespin went with them once or twice, but he did not care for it greatly, and he didn't mind saying so. Usually Traherne and Mrs. Crespin flew alone—with or without a mechanic. They did not fly very far, and they did not fly over-often, and Traherne took no risks when his friend's wife was with him. But Lucilla Crespin liked it keenly; she talked about it, and thought about it a great deal, far less silent now than she had been since before the war, and a happier light crept into her eyes, and a soft glow on her face. And Crespin was as gratified as the Colonel himself was. Antony Crespin was as glad to have Lucilla go as she was to go, and as Dr. Traherne was to take her.

Once or twice Captain Bruce went up with them, and they made several attempts to take the Colonel.

But the Colonel swore at the very suggestion. He had the V. C. and he had earned it. He was cheerfully (and profanely) ready to shoot promptly any one who called him a coward, but there was just one thing he wouldn't do either for King or Country—he wouldn't go monkeying about in the air like a loon; and Kathleen shouldn't do it either.

There are no tête-à-têtes in the air—none at least in which the pilot shares. But they shared an exhilaration, a splendid new experience, and a pastime that they almost equally liked. And they mutually knew that they liked to share it all, and enjoyed and treasured it more because they shared it. And the very silences it enforced fed the intimacy that grew between them.

When they came back, and landed, it was natural that more often than not Dr. Traherne took Mrs. Crespin to her bungalow, and that when they had reached it he followed her in for tiffin or tea. They found a great deal to say to each other, about books and people and things in England. He knew he was welcome; she knew that he liked to be there. And Traherne's visits at the Crespins' bungalow gradually grew more frequent and longer. And Major Crespin stayed at home more and more, strolled off to mess or club less and less when Traherne was in the drawing-room or on the veranda. And something of the old, cordial relation between them at Harrow came back to the two men at Dehra Dun. Lucilla and Traherne did the most of the talking when they three were together. And often Antony Crespin scarcely knew what they were talking about; but he liked to listen—and sometimes to guy as he lounged near and played with Iris and Ronald—and they liked to have him there with them, listening and guying.

Traherne played with the youngsters often too. They were attractive children—not ayah-spoiled yet, and the bachelor physician was very fond of children. And little Iris and Ronald Crespin soon came to claim him as very much a possession of their own.

If his regiment was at once Colonel Agnew's weakness and strength, equally her babies were Lucilla Cres-

pin's—her weakness and her strength. Iris was four now, Ronald was two. And Antony Crespin loved them both almost as much as he loved his wife.

All the regiment knew, and as good as all of the station, that there was an ugly, desperate rift in the Crespins' lute.

Major Crespin drank.

And he had not been faithful.

Every one blamed him fiercely. And no one in the least blamed Mrs. Crespin for anything that had come or might come—no one but Basil Traherne.

He blamed them both, and pitied them both. He believed that Mrs. Crespin could have handled the tragedy more wisely and more usefully than she did. He believed that she, unconsciously, withheld help and rescue which she, but no one else, might have given, and Antony seized. No one else saw or thought anything of the sort—Lucilla Crespin least of all. But it's a habit and gift able physicians have: to see *into* things. Each finger a scalpel, each pore a magnifying glass; exquisite manhood, a vigilant brain, a great sympathetic heart, an absolute balance and sense of justice, and an intelligence that cannot be tricked—and that is what good doctors are made of! Basil Traherne was a very great physician.

He saw the rift as clearly as any—deplored it more than most, and knew, what no one else but Antony himself did, that because of it and of what had made it, Major Crespin suffered and regretted even more intensely than the woman did.

Dr. Traherne believed that some, not much, but some, of the fault was Lucilla Crespin's. And that he did, proves him as fine in manhood as he was in physicianship; for, before he had known her a month

Traherne knew that he loved Antony Crespin's wife. He had never loved a woman before—or even thought that he had. He believed he never could care for another. And Dr. Traherne was thirty-six.

CHAPTER VII

COLONEL AGNEW was furious, splutteringly, dementedly furious, and at the same time coldly, and determinedly furious. No one ever had seen him so angry before. Kathleen, who ruled and teased and mocked him openly, poured out his coffee, and passed him the ginger-jam silently and abjectly. And a few moments after breakfast she fled from his presence—her own Daddy darling's—determined to avoid it for the rest of that day.

When Satan, his four-footed pal, sat up and begged for his after-breakfast lump the master had refused it, and thundered, "Go to hell!" No one ever had known Agnew to lose his temper with Satan, and the terrier flounced down on all paws, and slunk sugarless out of the room.

"Prayers, Daddy?" Kathleen said, as naturally as she could, when they'd pushed back their chairs. The Colonel was a staunch churchman, but no cut-and-dried one; usually he read a chapter to his girl after breakfast, and they said "Our Father" together, and then, if it wasn't too late, he'd bid her sing some hymn her mother had loved and sung—usually, but not always, and it was Kathleen Agnew's daily duty—almost her only enforced one—to ask if it was a "prayers" day, and to follow him into his den, and find the place in the Bible, if it was.

"Prayers, Daddy?" she asked gently.

"Prayers be damned!" was the terrible reply she got,

and all she got—not even a glance—as the Colonel stalked prayerless out of the room.

It was then she'd beaten her retreat. "Poor Daddy!" she thought. "How terribly he's feeling it!" She shook her pretty, yellow head sadly after his grim, gaunt gray one, and then smiled rather brokenly. For she thought there had been a lump in his throat—of course Daddy couldn't read prayers with a lump in his throat, poor dear. And Kathleen knew what it all was about. It was early morning yet, but all the regiment knew, and by tiffin all the station would know. And Whitehall would know by the very next mail home.

It was all up with Major Crespin now. He'd have to send in his papers this time. Every man in the regiment knew it, every native regimental servant. Every servant in the Colonel-sahib's bungalow knew it. Native women filling their jars at the wells were talking it over. Iris and Ronald's ayah and bearer had known it hours ago. The Parsi money changer who lived near the native bazaar, in the old house off of whose thick walls most of the magenta paint had cracked and gone, and Ali Lal, the melon-seller who drove his best trade in the despised Eurasian quarter, knew it too. Such news is no laggard in India; it flies faster than kites.

It was this:

At mess the night before Major Crespin had befouled and disgraced the regiment. And it had been guest night. A bishop from Bangalore, a general (almost a commander-in-chief) from the Madras Presidency, and—a thousand times worse, more bitter—an American officer of high rank, and Dr. Traherne had been the guests.

Crespin had had a fagging day, the Adjutant had looked at him suspiciously once or twice, and when the dinner hour came Major Crespin had had almost enough. When sweetbreads followed the fish he had had enough. And he grew offensive before the game. He came dangerously near contradicting the General twice. He mentioned a woman's name—one of the regimental ladies—and, in what he said, quite unobjectionably, but a woman's name is not mentioned in the officers' mess. You may think of her there—subalterns have owned to having done it—but you may not voice her name. It isn't done. He had spilled claret, and he had offered the Bishop a warm letter of personal introduction to the première danseuse of a French Company crowding a Calcutta theater just then —an artiste notoriously as frail of virtue as she was shameless in posture and skilful of feet. He had made—to the American—an unpardonable remark about Lee and Grant. It was all covered up, or attempted to be. The affronted guests all were not only gentlemen but jolly good fellows, and two of them had met Mrs. Crespin. It was smothered, talked under and shunted; and Traherne, the American officer, and the Bishop more than half hoped that Agnew, at the other end of the table from Crespin, had not noticed or realized. He had given no sign, and Crespin had purred his impertinences a little thickly, not shouted them, or pronounced them too clearly.

But at "Gentlemen, the King," as Agnew lifted his glass, Major Crespin, swaying a little on his feet, clutched at the back of the chair, hiccuped painfully, looked about him with a bleary smile, and collapsed half onto his chair, half onto the table.

There was nothing to be hoped then. There was nothing that could be done.

No more need be said.

It was final.

And now it was the next morning, that terrible, pitiless next morning that always comes, and always must, unless God grants the mercy of Death before the dawn.

It was the next morning and Antony Crespin, twitching and sick, lay wide awake on Traherne's bed.

He was suffering exquisite bodily torture. Traherne had done what he could. But that debt has to be paid. And it's an I.O.U. that no friend's purse can take up. The debtor himself has to pay.

But his mental torment was more than his quivering of fevered flesh and frightened trembling of sick, circling stomach. And his sorrow and shame of spirit were more than his wife's were, lying tearless, face down on her own bed. And Doctor Traherne—glass in hand—sensed that it was so, and pitied Crespin even more than he pitied Lucilla, even more than he pitied unconscious, happy Iris and Ronald.

But an ounce of help is worth more than a pound of pity any day—and most especially is this true "the next morning." Traherne slid his strong arm carefully under Crespin's head, and held the glass deftly to his mouth. The champagne was vintage and extra sec.

In spite of himself, in spite of his despair—it was almost absolute despair this time—the wine tasted good. Champagne usually does taste good to those who relish it. Perhaps it stands as firmest friend and kindest nurse to the very desperately seasick, but its second-best play of its magic trick probably is made "the next morning."

Crespin drained the glass, and even put up a trembling hand to tilt it farther and longer that he should miss no last drop. And he looked around to see where the bottle was.

There was no bottle in sight.

"You've had it all, old chap," Traherne told him, "a pint of it. Now try to rest a bit."

"Rest!" Crespin moaned.

"Lie perfectly still. That will help. I won't be long."

"You're not going to leave me!"

"Must," Traherne told him, pulling the *chick* a little closer. "Sorry, but must. I've something to see to that won't keep. I'll be back as soon as I can. And I'll tell Abdul what to do for you, and to see that you're not disturbed."

"Traherne, you must not leave me." There's never a time so miserable that the sound and sight of a friend—the right friend—cannot ease it.

"Look here," Traherne said with his hand on the other's arm, "I must. I wouldn't, if any one else could do what I've got to, but no one can. I must attend to it myself, and I must attend to it now. Keep quiet—that will help you most. And I'll get back as soon as I can."

Crespin called weakly after him as he was leaving the room.

"I suppose—my wife—knows."

Traherne evaded, as doctors sometimes must.

"She knows you slept here last night. I sent her a chit when we came in."

"Came in, I supporting your staggering steps, I suppose," Crespin said, with the sick attempt at humor that often comes with the stale after-fumes.

"We came in together," Traherne said affectionately.

"O Lord," Crespin told him, "you're the real stuff, Traherne!"

"Of course I am—to you. Now I *am* off. So long!"

But he was not off just yet.

"I say," Crespin pleaded anxiously, "can I have another drink?"

"Not yet," Traherne told him. "You shall, when I get back, with something to eat——"

"Don't!" the sick man groaned. "Give me a smoke then, before you go, and for God's sake don't be long."

Traherne found him the cigarettes, and took him the matches.

"Smoke if you like," he said, "but I wouldn't smoke yet, if I were you."

Crespin put his hand out for a cigarette, but even his hand was sick, and fell back from the effort.

Doctor Traherne put a cigarette in his hand, and struck a match and held it. But Major Crespin couldn't smoke.

Traherne left him then, closing the door of the darkened room with careful quiet.

And Antony Crespin was alone with his creditor.

CHAPTER VIII

DOCTOR TRAHERNE was *persona grata* at Colonel Agnew's bungalow, if any one was; and several were. Their people at home in England were neighbors and friends, and for that Agnew would have welcomed him, if there had been nothing else. But there was a great deal else. It was not often that Agnew liked a civilian, or saw anything in one to like. He didn't see what use they were anyway. The world was made for warfare, scientific, deliberated warfare, he had no doubt whatever of that. Most especially was it made for the British Army, and above all for *his* regiment. He was a staunch old Tory, of course—there *are* some still, and more than a few of them are in India—but he never troubled to read the speeches in the House, not even those of the Lords, unless they directly bore on His Majesty's Forces. He had no respect for any calling but his own—and almost as little intelligent knowledge as respect. He had gone in for fisticuffs in his cradle, and though his schoolmasters had not, among themselves, pronounced him startlingly brainy, none of them denied him considerable place as a tactician. He was an emphatic churchman—far more emphatic than devout—but he respected the church rather than its officers: he had no respect for any profession but his own. And this fact he rarely concealed. He reverenced his King—but most, it may be suspected, because His Majesty was the Head of the Army. Even the somewhat civilian adjuncts of the Service, doctors and padres and such, he held rather

coldly. He liked most women, and reverenced them all. But he had no doubt that God had made them to bear soldiers, and to be loved by the soldier-fathers of soldiers, and he pitied acutely any woman who had to make do with the caresses of less than a soldier-man or who brought forth any men children who failed to crawl through Sandhurst or Woolwich exams, and bolt enthusiastically into the fighting forces. He thought more of a private than he did of a Viceroy—and said so. And he'd gladly have given Kathleen to that blithering young jackass Bob Grant rather than to the Archbishop of Canterbury, or to a royal bridegroom who was not in the Service. No German warlord ever thought more of himself than Colonel Agnew thought of the British Army.

But there were soldierly qualities of mind and person in Basil Traherne to which the fine old specialist had had to respond. And if Doctor Traherne had not served with the Colors (Agnew simply refused to consider Volunteers) he had served *the* regiment well. He had disinfected and healed a diseased drain under the floor of the canteen when Crossland hadn't even suspected it, he had fought enteric through more than one epidemic, and had turned a cholera camp into a refreshed place of rest and frolic as innocuous as a kindergarten suffering placidly a slight visitation of mild German measles. And now Doctor Traherne had declared war upon malaria, and it looked as if that enemy of the British Army in the East was going to be defeated at last—defeated by the batteries of the English doctor's knowledge, patience and skill. It wasn't in Agnew to steel his heart or shut his respect and camaraderie against the man who was doing that, even if he didn't wear the uniform.

And at the Colonel's bungalow Doctor Traherne came and went as he would; always welcomed, always regretfully sped. But that bungalow door was practically shut in his face this morning.

The Colonel Commander Sahib was writing his English chits; no one could see him. And when the khansamah had said it he deliberately, though obsequiously, barred the way. Traherne could not get past Ali Halim without knocking him down, that was clear, and Traherne would not do that except in the last resort, for Halim was old, and they were most excellent friends. And at the far end of the hall—unlike most of its ilk, the Colonel's bungalow had a hall—the physician saw an orderly waiting outside Agnew's den. No doubt the orderly was armed; and Traherne was not.

But he was going to see the Colonel, and have considerable speech of him too, before the English mail went.

How?

He looked about him and thought: not a bad brace of trumps to play when in such doubt of means as his.

"Right-o, then," he said cheerfully, "but I'll wait here a bit, and cool, before I go. I've been walking fast"—which was true—"and I'm confoundedly hot and tired"—which was not true.

Ali Halim salaamed, and Doctor Traherne sat himself down in a very beautiful and big chair, which Kathleen Agnew had coveted and the Colonel paid for, in Lahore, standing now beside a very ugly hall table which the Colonel had admired in a catalogue, and had had sent out all the way from the Tottenham Court Road.

How?

A gong, a disk of hammered brass, slung in a frame of carved and inlaid camphor-wood, which Kathleen also had coveted somewhere and with the usual result, stood beside a bowl of magnolia buds on the Tottenham Court table. It never was used. Not even Kathleen Agnew dared use it. For the master of the bungalow detested noise, except bugle-calls, regimental bands and drill and parade orders, and the mighty music of battle, almost as much as he despised civilians. Even the clocks in his bungalow had to tick softly, and were not allowed to strike above a whisper. No bell rang for meals here, and certainly no gong was struck. "A damned impertinent way of telling a gentleman his food was ready—of course it was ready, when it was the precise moment at which it should be ready." Meals were not even announced under Colonel Agnew's rule. You went in to a second on time—and the meal *was* ready, ready *then,* neither before nor after. More than one English woman, visiting India, and the Agnews' guest for a day or a meal, wondered how her host would have adjusted himself to the post-war servants of London. Kathleen could have told them that he would not have done so, but that in all human probability they would have adjusted their post-war selves to him—or, if they didn't, he'd "cook the stuff himself."

The gong was not for use. It stood on the table in the hall because Kathleen liked to see it there. And the Colonel and father didn't care a brass farthing who saw it, or where they saw it, so long as no one ever hit it. And no one ever had from the day he paid for it till now.

Doctor Traherne used it now.

He picked up the mallet, and whacked that gong as if he'd suddenly gone gong-beating mad.

Ali Halim clutched at him. The khansamah almost knelt at his feet, and tears of sheer fright brimmed in the old native's eyes. Private Grainger stood soldierly stock-still on guard, waiting outside his Colonel's door. But the irreproachable buttons on his tunic shook, his neck rippled and turned purple with mirth. But the private did not stir. He had been told to see that no one came in to the Commandant's room; he had not been told to do anything else, and if a Bengal Tiger and the Taj Mahal had come into the hall, and begun waltzing together, Private Grainger would not have stirred—but not a white ant could have passed by him in to the Colonel.

But the Colonel passed by him—violently.

"What the hell!" he raged as he wrenched the door open, and nearly wrenched it off.

"I beg your pardon, sir," Traherne said nicely, laying down the mallet. "But I *must* see you. And Halim would neither let me go in, or tell you I was here."

"Quite right," was the gruff reply. "Come back to-morrow."

"I must see you now," Traherne insisted.

The Colonel's neck grew as purple as the private's.

"'Must' be damned!" the Colonel spluttered. "Go away. And don't come back here—to-morrow or ever!"

Doctor Traherne went the length of the hall, and laid his hand on the older man's arm. "It is positively necessary, sir," he urged quietly. "I must speak to you now—and alone."

Colonel Agnew made a sound, a pronounced sound, but it was quite inarticulate.

A tear rolled down to the old khansamah's white beard, and Private Grainger was praying—praying that he wasn't going to explode. In the first place, he did not wish to explode, and, in the second place, he intensely wished to live to get back to the canteen, and tell the story. It ought to be worth several pints of Poona best. He had seen "the old man hot in the collar before," but never as mad as this.

"What's it about?" the irate Colonel demanded. "You'll have to wait, I tell you!"

"That's just what I can't do, sir," Doctor Traherne assured him, "and we can't discuss it here."

"Discuss! Discuss be blowed!" the Colonel snorted.

"And I can't tell you here."

Agnew gave the physician's face a shrewd, searching glance.

"Cholera worse at Meean Mir?" he said a trifle more quietly. "You're not going off there, are you? We want to finish those hospital plans, you know."

"No—not cholera anywhere. Let us go into your own room, sir——"

"You go sit down somewhere else, and have a drink. I'll see you after I've finished a dispatch—to catch the home mail—if it's as important as that," Agnew told him.

"I'm sorry, Colonel Agnew," Traherne said respectfully, "but I must speak to you *before* you send anything to the out post."

The old soldier's thick white eyebrows gathered themselves into storm clouds, and he cleared his throat with an oath. But he was weakening.

"You seem to think yourself in command," he blustered.

"No," Traherne denied, "or I'd not need to disturb you, sir."

"You'll have to be damned quick," Agnew said surlily as he turned back to his room.

"As damned quick as you like," the doctor assented, following him.

Colonel Agnew threw an order at the old khansamah over Traherne's shoulder. "Throw that bally thing out to the crows!" he commanded. Halim took the gong up in one trembling hand, the mallet in his other. But he gathered his courage to say, "The Miss-Sahib think very great deal of it, sir."

"You heard my order!" Colonel Agnew thundered. "Hide the damned things, or give them to one of your wives, or your grandmother."

"It isn't likely to happen again, sir," Traherne said gently. "I was desperate. And Miss Agnew will be angry, won't she? Scold you, perhaps."

The grizzled mustache twitched. "It won't happen *twice* again," Colonel Agnew promised grimly. "Here, you, put the damned thing down where it was—and get about your business!"

Ali Halim held his hands up to Allah in gratitude as the Colonel's door closed again, and Private Grainger permitted himself a broad grin and a wide chuckle.

It must not be implied that Colonel Agnew swore more than most men. As a rule he did not, but he saw red to-day, had seen so red all night that he had not slept at all. Both man and soldier he was hideously upset—and when that was so nothing so nearly

relieved him as a good splutter of oaths. When well-nigh hysterical with anger he used "damns" as hysterical women use smelling-salts.

"I can't give you so much as five minutes," he said, as he seated himself at his writing-table, and Dr. Traherne sat down on the other side of it. "No," looking at his watch. "I'll give you exactly two. Go ahead."

"It's about Crespin," Traherne said at once.

Agnew's lips stiffened ominously. "There is nothing to be said about Major Crespin," he interposed sharply. "You might have spared your legs, and my time."

"I've come to ask you to give him one more chance, sir," Traherne persisted.

"No!" the Colonel blurted.

"I speak as his physician," the other man said.

"Speak as his grandmother, for all I care—but speak somewhere else. I have definitely decided what to do about Major Crespin, and I wish to catch the post. I intend to catch it," and the Colonel took up his pen significantly, and pulled towards him an unfinished letter that the gong in the hall had interrupted.

"You promised me two minutes," Traherne reminded him.

"Then I'll give them to you," the soldier snapped, "but I will not hear one word about Crespin."

"He can't help it, sir, it is disease."

"All the more reason to boot him out of the service. A soldier can help doing any damned thing that is unsoldierly. If he can't—he's no soldier."

"He can't help it—alone. I want you to let me help him to help it. I want you to give him a chance, and to give me a chance. I may fail: let me try though.

There is a great deal that is fine in Tony Crespin."

"Don't you suppose I know that?" the other growled. "I'm his colonel!"

"And because you are, sir, you will help me to help him."

"I wish to God I could," Agnew groaned. "But he's made that impossible this time. Don't say any more, Traherne. I know what you want. You want me—heaven knows what's it to you—to let him send in his papers. It can't be done. I have my duty to do. I respect my commission, and the uniform I've the honor to wear, if that poor devil doesn't. And Major Crespin is going to be dismissed from the service. He must."

"Let him send in his papers?" Traherne ignored the worse that had followed. "I want more than that, sir!"

"Oh—you do, do you?" Agnew growled.

"Very much more, sir. I want you to let it pass."

The Colonel threw down his pen, and sank back in his chair, speechless.

Traherne pressed on. "If he has to leave the Army, his case will be hopeless."

Agnew found his voice. "The Service will be hopeless, if we officer it with drunkards."

"It is not quite hopeless, I think—and I'll be on the job for all I'm worth, if you'll let me have it my way, sir. Let him stay on with you. Give him leave—not too long, and I'll take him off after game or butterflies, or any old thing. I'll make him come. Or, if he won't for me, he will for you!" Agnew looked down, his eyelids blinked. "And bring him back with the stuff out of his blood. And when I have, I'll stick

to him like a leech, and a brother and a doctor. I want to *cure* him. I believe that I may be able to do it—with your help, sir."

"I'm no doctor!"

"I'm not so sure, sir," Traherne replied with a quiet smile. "I've seen you in cholera camp, remember. And I've a theory that every great soldier is a pretty fine sort of physician as well."

"Cut the blarney," Agnew snapped—but he was pleased. "Why are you so set on it, man? It wouldn't be a pleasant job. Stick to malaria, there's more in it."

"I'll stick to both," Traherne replied.

"But why in thunder do you want to do it? That's what I want to know. No—no—I don't," the old man had suddenly flushed like a girl, "—didn't mean that. None of my business."

Traherne smiled again. "It isn't for Mrs. Crespin that I want to do it, Colonel," he said simply; "not half so much for her as for him."

To cover his confusion, Agnew looked at his watch. When he had he swore.

"You've made me miss the mail," he said hotly, "you've tricked me into it! I'll wire. Do as well."

"I did not try to make you miss the mail," Dr. Traherne said, looking full in the other's angry eyes.

"I beg your pardon," Colonel Agnew said.

CHAPTER IX

COLONEL AGNEW got out of his chair heavily, and spoke to the man outside the door. "You needn't wait," he said.

"Traherne," he said, as he sat down again, "don't you think that I haven't tried to help Crespin. I have again and again. I've tried all I knew. We all have. It breaks my heart to have one of my boys go wrong. My men are my sons—I've only Kathleen, you know—the regiment's my sons. When Tony Crespin came out to us, he was only a boy. I fathered him, and, by God, I mothered him too. I never had a likelier subaltern—until——" Colonel Agnew broke off abruptly and sat drumming wretchedly on the table.

"He did well in the War, I've heard," Traherne remarked, both to give the other time and to make a point for Crespin.

"He did damned well in the War," Agnew said sharply. "And the War pretty well broke his heart. It did mine! We stuck here, sucking sugar-cane and ghee, with the greatest war in history going on over there—and pretty nearly going to blazes, and every fool regiment in the British army in the beautiful thick of it—some of 'em not fit to rub up our buttons or learn the goose-step! Damn it—but I don't want to talk about it."

"Some one had to stay here, I suppose," Traherne said conciliatingly.

"Who the hell said they didn't? But it needn't have been the best regiment in the British Army, need it?"

Agnew blazed. "Yes, yes,—poor Crespin did his mothers'-meeting, curate-to-tea bit, and he did it well. Wireless! Wireless—do-re-me-fa-sol! for a full-blooded man who aches and itches, and curses his guts out to be in at the fun—— Oh, well——" he pushed the cigars towards Traherne, and took one himself. "May as well," he said sadly as he struck a match. "I *need* something, and it's too early for pegs, and now I've let the mail slip, half an hour won't matter." Dr. Traherne wondered ruefully how much it was mattering to Tony Crespin!—but he lit his cigar. He was up against the most difficult thing he'd ever tackled, and he knew it. He must not push Agnew too hard, he must bide Agnew's time, and wear his determination out gently—if he could wear it out. "Yes, he did well in the War. What he don't know about wireless no one does. But, Lord, how he felt it—not going over there. He cried about it, talking to me about it one day—when he was half sprung, poor lad—the only time I saw him much the worse for it while the War was on. Traherne," the old soldier leaned over the table, and whispered, "I cried! with the rage and shame and home-sickness for it all—I stuck here nursing sweepers to keep 'em 'loyal', *I cried,*—and I wasn't drunk."

The physician understood—and honored. But he couldn't think what to say.

"You did get to the front!" the old soldier said enviously.

"Pretty well," Traherne admitted. "There was plenty for doctors to do there."

"Doctors and surgeons," Colonel Agnew amended.

"And surgeons," Traherne said gravely.

They smoked in silence for a moment or two.

Agnew spoke first. "I did all I could for Crespin,

as long as I could. Did it because he was one of ours, because there was a good officer in him once, if ever I saw one, because of his people—mine know some of them at home—and because of his wife. Lord, Traherne, I could forgive him all the rest—all but last night—but not how he's treated his wife!"

"He is very fond of her," Traherne interposed.

"Tell that to the marines!" the Colonel growled.

"He is, sir," the other insisted.

"Taken a rotten way of showing it," Agnew grunted.

"Very rotten," Dr. Traherne agreed sadly.

"A sweeter woman never breathed. As nice a woman, and as good a woman too, as God ever made!"

"She is all that," Basil Traherne said softly.

"I wish you'd seen her when she first came to us."

"I can imagine her."

"We lost our heads and our hearts to her. There wasn't a man in the regiment that didn't love her, and rejoice in her—and, by Jove! there wasn't a woman that disliked her. Not one! I've been here some time, an' I never knew *that* to happen before. I never expect to see it happen again. She was a perfectly happy, fearless, confident girl. Well—she's fearless now! But where are her happiness and her confidence? Whiskey-poisoned, and wanton-killed. I've seen men die in battle—pretty badly mangled some of them—but a man can ask for nothing better than to die in battle! I've seen men hanged, I've seen men shaken and twisted *and maddened* by plague, and cholera. I've seen a white man eaten off by leprosy, a joint at a time, till there wasn't much left of him but his middle. But the damnedest thing I've ever seen was the

hardening of Lucilla Crespin—to watch her eyes stiffen, an' that low, sweet voice of hers, to feel her grow cold. It was bad enough when a look of terror began to creep into her eyes—it was a thousand times worse when it changed, and settled to a frozen, still despair. And her smile! She never smiled much in the old days, but it was worth seeing when she did. She laughed oftener than she smiled. Her laugh was a thing to hear, but it was her smile that fetched you—a dimple, and then a light! By Jove! You've seen Kathleen smile?" Traherne nodded. "Much the same thing. Sweet and glad, every bit of it! Now, that woman's smile is the bitterest, saddest thing I know."

"Not when she smiles at her children!"

"Gad, no!" the Colonel admitted. "The young motherhood of her has not been spoiled the least, thank God!"

"You can't spoil such motherhood," the doctor asserted.

"Yes, you can," Agnew retorted. "I've seen it done—in India. Well, she never gave a sign, not once, that I ever saw or heard of, through it all. She just froze—died, as it were, and lived on dead. I wonder how much of it all you know, Traherne, or have heard?" he broke off.

"I've heard very little. I've avoided hearing, as much as I could. But I can read between the lines a bit—it is one of the tricks of my trade, you know."

"Well, you're going to hear it now, man, what I know of it—and I know enough to turn an Eskimo sick. And when you've heard, I don't think you'll ask me to be easy on Major Crespin."

Dr. Traherne smoked on in silence.

"It seems Crespin took too much once or twice when

he was a subaltern, but only once or twice, and not so very much, and it never got to me. Always liked the stuff, I suppose. Crossland had suspicions of that from the first—so I learned later. Soon after he got his company Crespin went home on long leave, and when he came back he brought his wife with him. I'm always a bit anxious when one of my youngsters does that. Tony Crespin must have been thirty-one or -two then. I'm always anxious till I see how it works. Marriage is a damned queer thing—the queerest I know. Sometimes it sinks; sometimes it smashes; sometimes it jogs on in a dull dog-trot; sometimes it glides on oil. That was what their marriage did at first. Couldn't ask for a better husband, and no woman in her senses would ask for a more devoted. No nonsense about it—slops are loathsome, of course—but just downright happiness and the very best sort of good-understanding. Then"—the old soldier's mouth hardened—"I'm damned if he didn't begin to tilt it up—and then went right off the deep end in B. and S., and fizz and Johnnie Walker. She was the last to know it, of course. Crossland got the wind up first it seems—and did his best. I saw it, when no old fool could help seeing it—and I did my damnedest. What I haven't said to Tony Crespin on the subject wouldn't be of much use in a temperance campaign. Try! Oh, we tried. Stand by him? We stood by him. He pulled up, then he slid back. Not once, not twice—again and again. We were with her, my wife and I, when the cable came saying her father had died. It ought to be against the law for such news to be sent by cable. I'd make it a criminal offense, if I could. She didn't say a word—it isn't her way—just read the blamed thing over two or three times, then laid it down on the

tea-tray, and pushed the cups and saucers about a bit. But her face! I shall not forget her face. Mary, at the look of that girl's face, just took up that blasted cable and read it, and then she handed it to me, and I read it. Mary didn't ask any permission, or make any apology, and no more did I; for I knew whatever Mrs. Agnew had done was the thing to do—and I don't think she'd have heard us, no matter what we'd said, or how loud. We didn't know what to do. It wasn't often my wife didn't know what to do—but she owned, on the way home, that she was properly stumped that time. We didn't know what to do. We knew she didn't want us to stay, didn't want any one near her, and we couldn't bear to leave her. She was delicate then. Mary said something to her—don't remember what. I was tongue-tied, I can tell you. She didn't seem to hear my wife. But presently she said, 'Where is Tony? Please find him for me. I want Tony.' And just as she'd said it, Crespin lurched in—*lurched*. Not half-seas over, but drunk! So drunk—he reeked—and when he saw me he giggled. And that was how she learned it."

Colonel Agnew pushed his chair back angrily, and went to the window.

Kathleen Agnew's garden was the show place of Dehra Dun. Even for India it was almost surprisingly beautiful. How she'd contrived it in her few years only she and the *mahlis* knew. Colonel Agnew said all his pay went to pay the *mahlis*. Except a clump of neam chameli, keeping their stately beauty apart in a corner, and drenching the place for many yards with the scent of their lovely cream tube-shaped blossoms, none of the giant trees of India were there. But sweeter far, though desperately heavy, was the odor of the love-

sacred champa. A grove of mock-oranges (we miscall them syringa) always reminded Lucilla Crespin of her father's garden in Surrey—but the emerald, ruby-billed, blue-tailed, pink-throated parrots who kept house in them did not. There was a long avenue of roses—all the colors, all the sweetnesses of roses. There was a wilderness of roses, jungles of roses. There was green sward velvet—more English-seeming than Indian. Stephanotis bloomed pink beneath the delicate bamboos, begonias edged the once sacred tank where the lotus still floated. Maidenhair ferns grew everywhere, plants of it, thickets and walls of it. Yellow honeysuckles and yellower jasmine looked lemon-pale beside the venusta's flaming orange. Peacocks strutted and fanned between pink camellias and velvet iris, and wise-faced monkeys flung and chattered among the oleanders. And the lithe bronze *mahlis,* naked but for brown loin-cloths, crooned as they worked and pottered.

But Colonel Agnew, gazing at it all, saw none of it. Presently he said, without turning even his head, "And her baby—the girl—was born that night."

Basil Traherne neither moved nor spoke.

Agnew pitched his cigar out on the jasmine, came back to his chair, and lit another. "She forgave him, of course, or I suppose she did. I tell you, all along she never has said a word nor given a sign. I've often wondered if she ever has even to him. He kept straight for a bit after that. And, if ever a man was proud of a child, Crespin was proud of that baby. The boys used to chaff him, and ask if he wouldn't like to bring it on to parade. And he'd say, he would."

Traherne nodded.

"He kept straight, but he didn't keep on keeping

straight. Every once and again, he'd break out—and, whenever he did, Crossland did his prettiest, and I did my damnedest."

Dr. Traherne smiled slightly, but Colonel Agnew did not see it—perhaps that was as well.

"I don't say he went the whole hog often. He didn't. But he sipped and sipped—a damned sight more than was good for him—or the rest of us—or for her. I've told you how that poor child learned she'd married a downright hard boozer. The way she found out about women wasn't much pleasanter."

"I'd rather——" Traherne began.

The Colonel ignored it. "It was in Pindi. He had a month's leave, and for some reason—I forget, if I knew—they spent it, of all places in the world, at Pindi—had a bungalow there. There was a show there just then, as if Pindi was not hot and uncomfortable enough without theater-going. Some of the troupe put up at the Dak Bungalow—among them a Jezebel they called 'the leading lady.' You've heard of Terése Carter?"

"No."

"Thought every one had. Hadn't much reputation as an actress, but more than enough as a—woman. But I ought not to say that—probably not her fault—sorry I did. One morning, early, Mrs. Crespin had been making her own bazaar, and she went into the Dak to ask about a dhursi's character. She got Crespin's instead. The rooms open off of the dining-room; Terése Carter, in a thin sort of thing, with all her red hair loose about her, and her door pretty well open, the cotton curtain drawn back—I suppose for the cool, not that there ever is any at Pindi—was sprawled on her bed, and Crespin was sitting—half-sitting on it—on the bed, with a lot of the woman's red hair held up

to his face, and a sick-sheep look in his damned eyes. Mrs. Crespin stood stock-still, Mrs. Lawson said—Dick Lawson's wife was with her, and saw it all, they'd been making bazaar together—and watched them, then just moved on, and did her errand. She never said a word to Mrs. Lawson, or let her say one word to her—and nobody knew what she said to Crespin afterwards—if she did. I know what pattern most men are cut, Traherne; wouldn't be much of a C.O. if I didn't, and you do too, or you're not much of a doctor. But, damn it all, I'd like to have the hanging of every man that plays that low-down trick on a good wife. And when a scoundrel that does, lets her find him out, in my opinion, that second villainy is worse than the other, by God."

"And in mine," the physician said.

"At Sumnee there never had been any hint of that sort of thing in Crespin. Couldn't be. Not a white woman in Sumnee, you know, except those in his own regiment—till the Dorsets came. Well, Miss Terése Carter wasn't the last. There have been others since—more or less flagrant. One, at least, a Service woman. The Crespins came back from Rawal Pindi a few days after that—on what terms I never knew. But we could see the breach widen—and could only stand by, and watch it widen, and the misery grow and grow stonier in her face. Now, Dr. Traherne, what have you got to say for Major Crespin?" The Colonel brought his clenched fist down on the table with a blow that sounded like an enraged demand for arnica. "Rather a black, rotten story, eh?"

CHAPTER X

"VERY—rotten," Traherne replied, "and sad."

"Got anything more to say for Major Crespin?"

"Yes. This. When I was a boy at Harrow, one of the small boys, about the youngest there, Antony Crespin was my fag-master. He was jolly decent to me. He wasn't much at schools, but every one liked him, masters as well as boys. He was prime at sports; and at everything he had the pluck of a dozen, and he was absolutely straight, and scrupulously fair always. But he always had a hunted look in his eyes. I saw it then, shaver though I was, without understanding it in the least. I understand it now. And I knew—I don't know how I knew, but I did—that Crespin was unhappy."

Colonel Agnew hitched impatiently in his chair. All this did not interest him in the remotest. But he did not interrupt. Traherne had listened to his story, he'd listen to Traherne's. Colonel Agnew too was scrupulously fair always. But he scowled, and his white eyebrows met in their ominous beetling.

"And I knew one other thing about him. He almost never spoke of his people. But I knew, don't know how again, that he worshiped his mother, and very much less than worshiped his father. He had a photo of Mrs. Crespin—his mother—over his bed. I believe he said his prayers to that picture, and, if he didn't, he said them about it. It was the photograph of a very beautiful woman, "Mother"—only that—written across one corner. He used to write to her all the time—

oftener than any other boy wrote to any one. I used to post his letters often—mostly they were not thin ones—not those to his mother, and I didn't often have any others to post for him. She came to see him two or three times while he and I were both there—he left long before I did. He was older than I, and going into the Army, of course—they never stay at public school long, as you know. I used to think he half lived for those visits. His joy when he knew that she was coming, and his pride and devotion when she did come—I remember it! She was as beautiful as her picture, sir—and she seemed as fond and proud of him as he was of her. He took me home with him for a week-end once. His people's place was not very far. They gave me a ripping time—the Saturday. We got there early Saturday morning. I didn't take to Mr. Crespin—couldn't have said why not: he was decent to me. But I thought there was an undertone of boorishness in the way he spoke to his wife, a mean look in his eyes—nothing much, couldn't put my finger on it—I was pretty much of a kid—but I seemed to get it. And I felt sure that Tony and his mother were happier together when Mr. Crespin was not there. And the half-impression I'd got at Harrow that Tony had no special love for his father was considerably deepened, and I gathered too—couldn't have said how, and couldn't now—that the boy did not respect the man. Sunday was all right—till dinner. Mrs. Crespin looked queer when she came into the drawing-room, her hair was beautifully done, I remember, kid as I was, wondering how long it had taken her maid to do it, and her gown was A-1, and she smelled of some delicious scent as she moved—almost too much of it, and I thought she had too much powder on, and oughtn't to have used any,

her skin was so beautiful—just like milk, I'd noticed, out in the sunshine when we'd played tennis. By the time we'd finished fish her *face* was red, and Tony's was the color of chalk. He talked, how he talked, poor devil!—and I can see the love in his eyes now when he looked at his mother. Mr. Crespin scarcely spoke, but made a capital meal, and watched his wife with a bad smile on his face all the time. Before the poultry was served, I understood—couldn't help it. Her voice was thick, her hand unsteady, and her face flamed. She didn't eat much, but she drank—I know now that she couldn't help it—and her husband twice reminded the butler to fill her glass! When she pushed back her chair, and rose to leave us, she lurched. Tony drew his mother's arm through his, and led her from the room as if she had been a queen! He didn't come back till very late. When he did, he didn't stay long. And he didn't sleep that night, as he had the night before, in the room I did. We left at an unearthly hour on Monday—had to, of course—and I didn't see Mrs. Crespin to say good-by."

Colonel Agnew cleared his throat. "Do you mean?" he began. "Do you believe——"

"I believe, sir, that Antony Crespin's mother was a nice woman who needed help she didn't get, or a chance and peace to help herself in, as I believe that Major Crespin needs help that I can perhaps give him and help him to help himself—which is the only help that amounts to anything in such cases——"

"I tell you——" Agnew broke in hotly.

But the physician in his own turn too interrupted. "That you and Crossland have given him every possible chance, done your best, and done it generously? I am sure of that, sir. But the thing is very difficult. No

ailment, except insanity, is less understood, or more persistently bungled—by doctors, the best of them," he added quickly.

The Colonel smiled grimly. "But you wouldn't bungle it?"

"God knows," Dr. Traherne said humbly. "I'd try not."

"Isn't it hopeless always?"

"Not always. Even insanity is healed, fairly often, in spite of criminally wrong treatment."

"You think he inherited it?"

"I think he inherited a tendency, perhaps, or—more probably a possibility. I do not believe that it is congenital. I do not for one moment believe that that poor lady drank until something drove her to it—after her marriage, and probably after her boy's birth. And I think it very likely that Tony Crespin took his first drink too much when he heard of his mother's death."

"And the *women?* Inherited from the other side, I suppose?"

"I can't say, sir. Alcohol itself fathers that lapse very often. And the thing itself is rather too common to lay it overconfidently at any one father's door."

"Yes," Agnew agreed sadly. "Did he say anything?"

"Tony? To me, about what had happened at his home, sir? Not one word—on the way back to Harrow, or after. But—I saw him suffer—then and after. Once a lot of fellows were talking—were talking about the thousand and one things that boys at school do—and got on to what ought to be forgiven, and what, if anything, ought not—no matter how repented and all that. Crespin did not join in and, of course, I didn't. I was fagging, making their toast and so on. But

after they'd gone, he said to me that there was one thing he'd kill for. And when I said, 'What?' he said he'd *kill* any one, no matter who it was, that ever said or thought a rough word of his mother. And there was murder in his eyes, sir. I thought he meant it as a warning to me. I think it was. He needn't have done it. I took an oath to myself that Monday morning on the train, going back to school, that no word of it'd ever pass me, and that I'd do my best to forget it. No word ever has before, and I've told it now for him."

"Ever see her again?" Agnew asked, as he again marched off stiffly to the open window.

"Twice," Traherne told him. "She came to Harrow twice after that before Tony went to Sandhurst. If Tony had treated her like a queen on her other visits, I can't describe how he treated her those two times. I couldn't help feeling that *he* was trying to apologize to her—to make up to her for it. Colonel Agnew, Antony Crespin loved his mother with a love very few women ever get—a love that ought to make up to a woman for almost *anything*."

Colonel Agnew, with his back to Traherne, drew out his handkerchief, and—sneezed.

CHAPTER XI

DR. TRAHERNE waited for Agnew to speak.

"I almost wish," the older man said slowly, after a time, "that his wife knew—what you've just told me."

Traherne nodded. "But we can't tell her, sir. And Major Crespin never will. And probably no one in India knows but you and me and him—perhaps no one else living now, knows or remembers. But his Colonel *knows* now, sir," he added rising and going to the man at the window.

Agnew swung round on him. "What do you want me to do, doctor? What the blue blazes *can* I do? Guest night! Damn!"

"I ask you to pass it over, sir—this once more—to give Major Crespin a goodish long leave—not too long—and leave the rest to me—let me try out my plan."

"Two generals—one from the U. S. A.!" Colonel Agnew almost bleated.

"Yes—awkward," Traherne admitted.

"Damned awkward," the Colonel said curtly.

"But they'll not say a word, sir. They were eating your salt. Let me tackle them. General Harland *is* awkward, I'll admit. I wish he hadn't been there."

"I wish it hadn't happened," the Colonel said miserably.

"Yes! But General Harland is not in command of your district, sir. You can't ask him to wink at your not reporting it. But I can. I think I can

get him to *ask* you not to report it. And you are in command here, sir."

"You think you can do a lot, don't you?" Agnew snorted.

"I can speak as a *physician,* sir," Traherne said persuasively. "And the General is no end of a good fellow—every one says so. And then I'll tackle the Bishop—"

"Oh, damn the Bishop!" the Colonel said. "No—I'll consult General Harland myself, Traherne. It's up to me. I don't give a damn which of us tackles the Bishop. But General Tyler—our American guest—that's what *hurts,* Traherne—that an officer of another service saw—one of mine—what General Tyler saw last night!"

"Yes, I know, sir. But he *was* your guest. He's one the best too. It's safe forever with him."

"Oh, Lord," the Colonel chuckled wretchedly, "and America's just gone dry!"

"General Tyler hasn't gone particularly dry, sir," Dr. Traherne reminded him. "He took claret at dinner. And His Majesty's health went down him in fizz. And he had a stiff peg with me at two o'clock this morning."

"Good Lord, Traherne! Where?"

"At my digs, sir. General Tyler and I took Major Crespin home—to my bungalow, and saw to him, both of us. General Tyler was no end sorry about it. He was sorry for you, sir. He was sorrier for Crespin. Said so. He's all-wool-and-a-yard-wide—a saying of his own countrymen's, sir."

There was a pause.

Colonel Agnew went back to the writing-table, and took up the dispatch, and tore it into very small bits

before he threw it into the big waste-paper basket. Then he kicked the basket.

"Boy!" he bellowed.

"Topee," he snapped when the bearer appeared. "You go prescribe for the Bishop, if you like," he said to Traherne. "I'm off to eat humble pie to the General—General Harland. After tiffin, I'll call on General Tyler, and ask him to come to the Club and lick me at poker."

"He will, sir," Traherne laughed.

"By God, he shall," Colonel Agnew said.

And a few days later Traherne and Crespin went off after game.

Sometimes Traherne thought he was winning, or, as he put it, that Crespin was. At others he thought he was losing.

Crespin came back to his regiment, and back to old failures and stumbles sometimes. But neither man ever quite gave it up. Colonel Agnew looked the other way more than once. He grumbled and threatened a great deal. And he prayed—but that he kept strictly to himself.

Lucilla Crespin grew whiter and colder. Iris and Ronald grew bonnier and chubbier—and their mother loved them more and more, gay and tender always with them, their beloved saint and tireless playmate. And Traherne, as he watched her with them, had almost more in his heart, and his strong tingling man's blood, than his resolve and endurance could match. But they held. He often wondered if Mrs. Crespin knew what he felt—guessed it at all, any of it—but the woman, if she did, gave no sign.

Crespin recovered and lapsed—lapsed and recovered.

And the regiment, watching, wondered how long the "old man" was going to put up with it—and so did the entire station.

And the Colonel wondered himself, and told Dr. Traherne so, more than once. And always the physician pleaded, "A little longer, sir!"

"How is it going to end?" Agnew demanded one day.

"Before long, in one of two ways," Traherne said, "assuredly. He will win out now, or he'll die. He *is* very much better of his failing. But his nerves are about frazzled, and his body won't stand too much more. Let him keep his uniform, sir. I'll see that he doesn't openly disgrace it. I promise you that. Let him *fit* it once more, or let him die in it. That will mean a great deal to him. Take it from him, and I give you my word his game is up."

At which Colonel Agnew "damned" Dr. Traherne, and yielded to him.

Agnew, too, often wondered if Mrs. Crespin knew what Traherne felt towards her. The Colonel had no doubt.

Whether Mrs. Crespin knew all, little or nothing, Major Crespin knew now; and, knowing his own handicap and the other man's worthiness, was bitterly, blackly jealous.

That mended nothing, helped nothing, and retarded and impeded much.

The children and their ayah and bearer had been sent to Pahari about a month before Major Crespin's leave was due, nearly two years after the American General had broken Colonel Agnew's regiment's bread, and honored its salt. Dr. Traherne watching, without seeming to, thought he saw a breakdown

threatening. At such times to get Crespin away and out of sight was always his first concern; it sometimes averted, and—the next best thing—it always hid.

Traherne had a new "bus," a costly, beautiful "flyer," of which he was boyishly proud. There was a good deal of boy still in Dr. Basil Traherne in spite of his natural gravity and his thirty-five years. The boy persists longest in the biggest men.

He urged the Crespins to let him fly them to Pahari, where they proposed to spend their not long leave with Iris and Ronald in the cool of the hills. Mrs. Crespin was eager to fall in with Traherne's suggestion, and Major Crespin, a little to their surprise, agreed to it placidly; for the last two years scarcely had improved things between Crespin and Traherne, and had distinctly made them worse between husband and wife. And Major Crespin had almost as little flair for aircraft adventure as his Colonel had.

It is said that the offender never forgives. Certainly it is quite explicitly hard for the one in the wrong to do so. And it takes more spiritual asset than continued alcohol often leaves. Antony Crespin was not ungrateful to Dr. Traherne for the physician's ministrations that "next morning," and on several others that had followed it. But the memory rankled. And he made it harder and harder for the physician to succor and brace him, or to keep up the show of a cordial friendship, which in India Crespin never much had felt, and which Traherne on his part found wearing steadily thin. The physician's interest in his "case" never slackened or wavered, but the man's liking for the man very nearly went. He stood to his merciful professional guns undauntedly—but he did it not a little grimly.

The curly-cue thing that your doctor writes at the head (or if he's a "big man," has printed there—to save him the trouble) of the prescription he instructs you to have made up at the chemist's, and take inside you three times a day before meals, is a prayer to Apollo. "Grant health, O Apollo!" It seems almost a scandal, a medical lapse and neglect, that every physician does not write it himself, and put his thought and heart into it as he does; and seems too a trifle surprising in these piping days of spiritual-healing and psycho-all-sorts-of-things. Every physician aims to give the same professional devotion—of course!—to the patient who does not attract his personal liking as to the patient who does. But, because doctors are only human, even the most truly vocated rarely quite succeed. Dr. Traherne tried determinedly to give Crespin the same care and help that he had while his old affection for him still held—and the physician succeeded as well as the man could. But Crespin's continued, though perhaps on the whole rarer and less, misconducts and his growing surliness and peevishness, rasped Traherne's patience and turned his once sincere liking to a feeling very different. And his growing love and longing for the woman whom Crespin's name still claimed, and whose coldness and aloofness towards her husband visibly grew from month to month, made any real feeling of friendship for Crespin impossible now to Basil Traherne. His memory of Tony Crespin, Harrow boy and fag-master, was tender and beautiful still. But it grew faint, or, at least, more remote, and even a little blurred—and rarely vividly associated with the heavy, flushed, dulled-eyed Major Crespin whose wife Traherne pitied and desired.

That is how it stood with them, as the new aeroplane imperceptibly rose from the flat beyond the parade-ground, into the velvet-blue, and flew towards the Himalayas.

CHAPTER XII

ODD places and peoples lie—for the most part unsuspected by the rest of the world—tucked away solitary and secure in the uncharted wilds beyond the Himalayas: tiny isolated kingdoms, each knowing naught but itself, and unknown of all others, strongholds of primitive peoples and of old primitive ways, elaborately customed, impregnably individual—wonderful, incalculable domains to which few white travelers journey, from whose sullen bourne none return.

The Himalayas are cut and gashed by a thousand fissures and natural passes, and between those loopholes in the great mountain range lie many a hidden principality, cupped in mountains and rocks as impenetrably as the lair of some skilful outlaw often is safe from the utmost vigilance of the police of the American Northwest.

Such was the Kingdom of Rukh: its prince keeping his state, his people keeping their ways, exactly as they did long before the days of Genghis Khan, speaking their own guttural language, worshiping their own gods, obeying their prince in all ways and their priests in some—for their prince was more to them, more loved, more feared, tenfold more obeyed than all their small man-made heaven of gods. Who were they? What were they? Whence had they come? What was their place in the great interknit mosaic of mankind? None can say. To trace them quite definitely to any outside kinship were hopeless. Yet most of their faces

were somewhat Mongolian, with here and there one more of Aryan type—always in some tribesman of power and place.

It was an absolute monarchy, if ever earthly sway and power were absolute—if the word "absolute" itself has any justification of veracity.

The Raja of Rukh ruled with an unquestioned despotism no Western monarch dreams of, and of which but few in the past ever have dreamed, and none ever has attained.

So often is Asian princeship thus that it would call for no remark in telling of Rukh, were it not for one odd fact. Of all the natives of little Rukh, this almost omnipotent ruler was the sole one who had smirched his birthright, and sinned against the more-than-religion of the race. For the Raja had traveled, he had broken strange, unconsecrated breads, eaten strange, polluted meats. He had lived in Europe, and now in the fortress-home to which he had come back to his own he in his own person mingled—superficially at least—ways of Europe with the ways of his fathers. At this his people had wondered a little, but not one had doubted or questioned, unless indeed Toluk Yap, the high priest, doubted now and then. And not even Toluk Yap ever had questioned. For the Raja was god in Rukh, and the gods but satellites of his power and rank.

Too, all that he occasionally did, ate, or wore that might have hinted to you or to me of Pall Mall or the Champs Elysées, seemed to his enslaved, docile people but an eccentricity of his individuality. It might have stood to them for defilement, his occasional aping of European ways, and have disgruntled and lashed them to cut-throat fury and open rebel-

lion, had they sensed it for what it was. But that they could ill do, since they did not know or suspect that there was a Europe. He had been away, and he had come back to them; that was all they knew; and that he had come back was all they cared.

He had brought back with him one grotesque curio at which they gaped for a time, and then ignored with stolid disgust as far as they could: a white ape of a man—if it was a man—who, little heed as they paid it, gave them their first unformed film of idea that somewhere beyond the mountains that bounded and ended their world there were places on the earth that were bleached—where trees and reptiles, rocks and sky, if trees, reptiles and stones and sky there were, all were bleached white by the torture and misfortune of existing so far from Rukh, as the tawn of the leopard was sometimes bleached by the lash of the high Himalayan cold.

Such prolonged absence as this Asian prince had allowed himself well might have cost him his throne. Scarcely a monarch of Europe—with cables and cinemas to remind them—would dare to leave his people so long, and it seems a far rasher thing for a prince to risk whose kingship and throne lay on the more quickly shifting sands where every prime minister is a would-be supplanter, almost every half-brother a usurper at core. But Rukh had known whom to trust and entrust, and had known when to go, and when to come back.

Unknown to the geographers of the Occident, unsuspected in Whitehall and Westminster, the Kingdom of Rukh lay snug in the mountains as it has, perhaps, since Adam was young. And its despot's rule was absolute. The King could do no wrong. For the

Royal House stood by the people, and the people stood by the Royal House in the Kingdom of Rukh.

A grim and dun-colored place it was, a region of gaunt and almost treeless mountains, all of them bleak, barren and gray of tone except where the clear atmosphere lent them some tint of its hot blue. Clinging fiercely to the fierce mountain wall, a mile or more away from the temple precincts, was a vast barbaric palace, its long stretches of glum unbroken masonry crowned and relieved by endless arcades and turrets; not two alike, yet all in key and consonance—a fortress-palace telling of centuries of human labor, of long generations of wealth and lordship. How many brown hands had lifted it up stone by stone, how many brown muscle-knotted backs had bent and strained at its making, is beyond compute. Millions of peasants must have been born to its hewing and heaving and making, and have died at it. Here in its desert of rocks, its forest of mountains, it spoke of suzerainty irresistible and unresisted as nothing in the West, and little in the East, does, a suzerainty so enormous, impossible ever in Europe, almost unprecedented in Asia, that it well-nigh told a human power the one thing that human power never is: omnipotent.

In almost the one level place in the principality was builded the temple, and housed the gods. This level place was small, a scant platform of earth wedged between two masses of rock. In the rock on the East the cave-temple had been roughly hewn. The thick, ungainly pillars, rudely carved, paint centuries old still showing faintly here and there, served to divide the cave roughly into three parts. Between the pillars in the middle section was a seated stone figure, a six-armed goddess, forbidding, ferocious of aspect, colored

face, arms and rough indicated robes a dark and sinister green. On a low slab of altar before her feet newly severed heads of six or seven goats still reeked from the priestly knife, blood still warm clotting about them, and one—the last knifed—still twitched and shivered in symbol of recent pain. Untidy and moldering wreaths and handfuls of flowers decorated the temple's honeycombed walls, and lay on its spattered floor. Blood dripped on marigolds, and bats flew cautiously here and there. How flowers had been come by in this desolate place of gaunt, bare rock, it were hard to guess. But the floral offerings were there. And there were gardens in Rukh, almost miracles of one man's compulsion and his people's persistence. The Raja had his gardens in the keeps of his palace, the priests and a petted woman or two had theirs contrived in some split in the mountains of rock, places of verdure and bloom as artificial as the hanging gardens of Babylon, and much more surprising. And the Raja had his runners. What the Raja of Rukh would, he commanded; what he commanded was fulfilled.

The open space before the open temple formed between the two rock-masses a rudely paved forecourt to the temple. It was bordered by a sparse company of smaller idols, weather-proof, it's to be hoped, and probably too comparatively insignificant to be housed with the six-armed monstrosity in the blood-spattered, bat-infested cave. Three round-headed stone posts stood near the outer lesser gods, and were painted green—whether in an economy of paint left over from the great Green Goddess, or in the wearing of her livery, were idle guesswork for a Westerner.

Mountain paths wound off behind the rock, and through the low, listless shrubs that grew impassively

beside them, long narrow paths winding in every direction, that the overlord's runners might hasten the quicker and surer wherever he willed.

There were few words in Rukh as a rule. The people worked too hard to talk overmuch. Their temple rites were nearly their only social gatherings; and the temple rites watched and done, they were wont to disperse almost in silence, lumbering stolidly back to labor, food or sleep.

But to-day the worshipers were lingering excitedly in the courtyard, watching wide-eyed something up in the air, a great gray and silver bird of prey, a strange fish-like bird with amazing markings of blue and red on its silver belly—only the ordinary identification of such birds, but neither Arabic nor Roman numerals were common sights in Rukh—a horrible monster bird of prey whose like they never had seen or heard tell of, never had dreamed of when nightmares tossed their hard-earned sleep; and it was swooping down on them with a hideous cracking whizz.

"Oo-ae!" a native cried.

"Oo-ae!" another sobbed.

"Oo-ae! Oo-ae!" they all cried then in mingled gutturals of dismay and despair.

It was a pathetically hideous group of unkempt, squat, frightened hillsmen, high-cheeked, rather Mongol in type, strong-limbed, stupid of face (not Mongol in that), adding nothing of color to the dark drab place, for their rough, almost unmade garments were somber and dark. A man of higher stature and better garments stood amongst them, his skin was lighter, his features more of Aryan type, his eye-sockets wider, more open, an embroidered fur cap on his head, a marigold stuck in its beads. He had some evident

authority over them—Yazok the temple priest—for when one turned to flee:

"Na-yam!" ordered the priest, and the man did not go. A braver raised his weapon—they most of them were armed—and again Yazok commanded "Na-yam!" and the fellow let his lifted arm and the weapon he held fall to his side.

On and down swooped the monster bird. The priest watched it, silent and motionless, but with a tense look of acrid dislike on his face, and a glance of patient contempt now and then to the huddled, shivering group which drew closer and closer together, pressing farther away to the edge of the place, closer and closer to him, ejaculating, "Oo-ae! Oo-ae!"

The bird had lit.

It had finished its flight just back of the temple. One terrible talon—or was it the tip of its great wing?—projected threateningly over the mass of rocks at the west. The aeroplane that had risen from Dehra Dun so surely and lightly, while the band had played "Good-by, I'm going to leave you now," had made a forced landing on the inhospitable slope of unknown Rukh, a landing so imperatively forced that almost it might be termed a crash.

CHAPTER XIII

LUCILLA CRESPIN came into sight first, but Traherne was first on the ground. Crespin climbing down rather awkwardly hesitated a moment at a difficult point, his foothold not too wide or secure, the available foothold below an uncomfortable distance to a man of his weight. India does not treat us all alike, we who invade her, not even our soldier-men. Punjabi soldiering had not kept Antony Crespin fit. Lucilla had known it for years; observant, clear-eyed, badly sensitive where those who were hers were concerned, she had watched the sag and the bloat come and gain almost day by day. But as she stood and looked at him now, it struck her anew, and more sharply than it had done before, sickened her even more than it had done in those two bitter hours of her fresh wifehood's disillusion when she had realized shudderingly the twin rotten fissures in a husband's being.

Women and wine! Both had branded and slackened him. She wondered which had spoiled and twisted him most. She knew which had tortured her the more. The "pegs" he had sipped and drained too often, too early, too late, and too strong, had disgusted and "turned" her clean, wholesome flesh the more. But the women had tortured her far more cruelly than his cups had. They had "turned" her soul and poisoned her heart. The drinking she held a weakness—contemptible but not unpitiable—innate, inherited, uncontrollable perhaps, but the infidelities that had affronted

her pride, bowed her head, curdled the milk in her young mother-breasts, she held a personal meanness and unforgivable crime, a hideous responsibility that lay forever at his door. It is so that women judge—forgiving, condoning every masculine folly and sin that is no direct reflection and slight to her.

This was not the man she had married—that almost obese, flush-faced Crespin standing irresolutely there a little above her. No. But it was what had been he, and it was the human being to whom she was indissolubly bound. The fetter cut into her being. But she kept her pact—now as ever.

"Take care, Antony!" she cried brightly, as he was about to risk it and jump. "Let Dr. Traherne give you a hand."

"Yes!" Traherne echoed. He already had gained the lower ground, surefooted and cool.

"Hang it all," Crespin shook his wife's suggestion and the other man's proffered assistance off with a testy impatience that spurred his own faulty physical courage, "I'm not such a crock as all that." He jumped as he spoke, jumped heavily, but landed safely enough.

Lucilla gave a little sigh of relief; she scarcely could have told herself how far it was sincere, how far acting—her wifehood was so permeated by acting now.

Traherne turned away from Antony, and a something of pity passed across the younger man's eyes; he understood, as she did not, that Lucilla's words had hurt Crespin—and he pitied him. He still judged Antony more fairly than Mrs. Crespin did, more fairly than she could, or many women can.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Crespin?" There was just enough concern in his voice and in his glance, and not an iota too much. Less would have been a boorishness,

Saved from the aeroplane crash, they faced new dangers.
(*George Arliss' screen version "The Green Goddess."*)

more must have been a caress. "Not very much shaken?"

"Not a bit!" she laughed.

"It was a nasty bump," the pilot said ruefully.

"You managed splendidly," the woman defended heartily.

"Come on, Lu," Crespin interrupted; "sit on that ledge, and I can swing you down."

Perhaps Basil Traherne doubted it, for he too went a step nearer and held out his hand, saying, "Let me—"

She put her hands impartially in theirs, and jumped lightly down, sayings "Thanks," as impartially.

The natives watching the strange newcomers with wonder and fear, began to chatter eagerly among themselves. If the big bird of prey had seemed uncanny and awesome, these strange creatures it had disgorged as it dashed to its death, scarcely seemed less so. All three were protected and disfigured with flying-helmets and leather aviation coats—odd enough sights to European eyes when seen for the first time. What must they not have looked to those untraveled natives of isolated, rock-bound Rukh!

The priest turned and said a word to one of the gape-mouth crowd—a lithe, sinewy youth more scantily clad than the others, a grotesque cipher, picked out in red, green and ochre, branded on one gleaming shoulder, and but for his rag of loin-cloth, stripped for his master's running, which was his office in life. The priest spoke, and the runner instantly made off at great speed towards the distant castle.

The travelers had taken off their helmets now, and a new murmur of wonder ran through the little cluster, while a half look of intelligence just showed on the priest's face.

"That last ten minutes was pretty trying," Major Crespin said, in the tone of a man who half apologizes, half defends some premeditated deed he knows apt to be censured. "I don't mind owning that my nerves are all of a twitter." He fumbled inside his thick leather coat, and pulled out a flask. "Have a mouthful, Traherne?" he asked with a nonchalance a shade overdone, as he unscrewed it and poured out a generous dram.

"No, thank you," Traherne said easily, helping Mrs. Crespin out of her coat.

"You won't, I know," Crespin said to his wife with a feebly jocular turn of the flask-top—now a cup—in her direction. "I will!" he drank off the brandy. "That's better!" He refilled the cup and drank again. "And now, where are we, Doctor?"

"I have no notion," Traherne confessed as he threw off his own coat.

"Let's ask the populace," Crespin suggested cheerfully. Traherne nodded, not too encouragingly, and Crespin went up to the still chattering crowd—in which the priest alone stood silent and grimly observant, watching the pale intruders intently through narrowing eyes. The natives shrank back in open fear as Crespin came up to them—all but the priest; he stood his ground, and even, at the half salutation the Englishman gave, salaamed slightly, but almost contemptuously.

Crespin spoke—in Hindustani—but it drew a blank. It was evident that Hindustani was as useless here as English or Norse. The priest listened blankly, and then in his turn poured forth a speech of some length —almost as long as it was guttural, voluble and heated,

pointing dramatically now to the dusky incarnadined temple, now to the beetling palace.

Perhaps Mrs. Crespin and Dr. Traherne expected little from Crespin's embassy, perhaps they were willing to wait patiently to hear from him its result. For they made no steps to follow him, and paid little attention, but stood together just where he left them.

"You were splendid all through," Traherne said in a low, tense voice that said more than his words.

"I had perfect faith in you," the woman answered, her eyes full and frank on his.

And his eyes thanked her. But he only said regretfully, "If I'd had another pint of petrol I might have headed for that sort of esplanade behind the castle up there. . . ."

"Yes, I saw it."

". . . and made an easy landing. But I simply had to try for this place, and trust to luck."

"It wasn't luck," Lucilla said quickly, "but your skill that saved us."

The sudden blood rushed over Traherne's wind-browned face. It was more than she had said to him ever before—not the simple, conventional words, but the pride in him that pulsed in them, pride in him, and something too of a claiming. She did not know that, and he knew that she did not. But he heard and understood, and his heart lashed at his ribs, and was hurt. In all the few hard years of his service to her, man's service never stinted, never underlined, no such open recognition of the hidden thing that lay between them had ever been told. He had known—from the first. But he had hoped and believed that she did not. Was he glad or sorry? He was both. His loyalty and

friendship regretted, but his man's nature leapt and was glad. When he had tried to hide Antony's weakness from her, and to shield her from it—to keep it out of her presence, to drive it from her thoughts, when together they had strained and schemed, as they constantly had, to save Crespin from himself, and her and her children from the present shame and coming consequences of his sick misdoings, no word, no sign, had been let slip from him to her, or from her to him, acknowledging why he stood to her side. She often had spoken to him of Antony's good qualities, never of Antony's faults.

But now a barrier was down—only one of many, the others still held, but one—and she had let it fall. It usually is the woman who lets it fall.

"It wasn't luck," she repeated contemptuously. "It was your skill that saved us," she added, and the change in her voice, the quick, white flame on her face, was confession and challenge—challenge the more compelling, confession the more complete, because the woman had made them unconsciously.

"You are very good to me," Traherne said in a voice not too well under control. The woman looked at him quickly. Their eyes met, as they had not met before. His face quivered a little. And then the man's eyes fell—not Lucilla's.

CHAPTER XIV

TO say that Traherne and Crespin were less than intensely perturbed at the situation in which they found themselves, and still worse in which they had landed the woman who was dear to them both, would be to wrong their intelligence—or any even mediocre intelligence. And these men had each more than average intelligence, mental equipment more acute and deeper than Crespin often had been credited with—for we most of us make the common and crass mistake of thinking that a mind, an intelligence, totally different from our own, is not so fine. Antony Crespin had punished and soiled his once fine body, almost hopelessly now, but, except for sheer physical nervousness that drugged it sometimes, he had not deeply injured his mind. He had been no carpet-soldier. Again and again, on active service, he had "made good," as soldier and as man. Traherne was the better man, but Crespin was the better soldier—which was as it should be. It was Major Crespin's business to make wounds, it was Dr. Traherne's business to heal them—unless the other had done his work so well that no chance or cause of help was left.

They were thoroughly frightened, but they took it lightly, of course: they were British. And but for the woman's being with them, they might even have found tingle and excitement not altogether unpleasant in the undeniable predicament. Lucilla made all the difference—she and, to Crespin, the two babies in Pahari. He was thinking of them as he turned back from his

fruitless mission. And his mouth set hard and sharp, and his tongue felt dry and thick. But he sauntered idly enough across the small flagged courtyard, and said with a careless shrug:

"It's no use—he doesn't understand a word of Hindustani. You know Russian, don't you, Doctor?"

"A little."

"We must be well on towards Central Asia," Crespin declared. "Suppose you try him in Russian. Ask him where the hell we are, and who owns the shooting box up yonder."

"Right-o," Traherne nodded. "It's worth trying at least."

Lucilla and Crespin followed a little behind him as he moved to the temple priest. And when he said something in Russian they saw that the priest's face kindled. He pointed to the rock-hung castle, pointed down to the ground, and then with one magnificent, wide, sweeping gesture that seemed to take in not only the whole country, but to indicate title-deed to all the world, exclaimed:

"Rukh! Rukh! Rukh! Rukh!" in a herald voice that proclaimed that the fortress-like castle was Rukh, the ground they stood on Rukh, the cave-temple, the immense horn of metallic lacquer poised on a crag beyond the castle—the most unique and surprising thing in all the amazing picture—the sky above, all of creation that mattered or counted—Rukh, imperial, incomparable Rukh—Rukh, the apex of the world.

But for all that his statement meant to them Crespin said disgustedly, "What the deuce is he rooking about?"

"Goodness knows," Traherne rejoined.

But the woman jumped to it.

"I believe I know!" she broke in. Crespin and Tra-

herne gazed at her in surprise—her husband incredulous, Traherne very curious. "Wait a minute!" she commanded, searching her pockets excitedly—almost, in her quiet, well-bred English way, as excited as Yazok himself. "I thought I had the paper with me. I wish I could find it. But I did have it, and I did read it. I know I did. I read it in the *Leader* just before we started, that the three men who murdered the Political Officer at Abdulabad came from a wild region at the back of the Himalayas, called Rukh."

"Yes," Traherne told them, "now that you mention it, I have heard of the place."

"Well, that's something," Crespin exclaimed. "Come, we're getting on."

"Perhaps," the physician said under his breath, as he turned again to Yazok the priest and accosted him once more in a few Russian words, pointing interrogatively to the palace.

But the priest's Russian was little, less than Traherne's own, and Yazok had no intention of being over-communicative.

"Raja Sahib," he said—so he had some smattering of Hindustani after all—"Raja Sahib," he repeated several times; but that was all that he would say.

But those two familiar words told them a good deal of what they wished to know.

"Oh," Crespin grunted, "it's Windsor Castle, is it? Well, we'd better make tracks for it. Come, Lucilla." He put his hand on her arm, and they turned to go.

But the priest barred their way, in a frenzy of excitement, pouring forth a wild torrent of, to them, quite unintelligible language.

Traherne intervened, speaking again in Russian, and it served to calm the hillsman measurably, though the

native throng at his elbows still muttered and gesticulated threateningly. But Yazok listened, if surlily, and presently vouchsafed in reply a few Russian words which he spoke slowly and with evident difficulty.

"His Russian is even more limited than mine," Traherne told the others, "but I gather that the Raja has been sent for, and will come here."

"All right," Crespin said wearily, "then we'd better await developments," and, lighting a cigarette, seated himself on one of the green painted stones, and began to smoke with impatient patience.

Oriental Bedlam broke loose. Almost before the Englishman had gained his hard seat Yazok rushed on him wildly, caught at his shoulders, and with wild exclamations and fierce blazing eyes, hustled him off, and then, disregarding utterly the amazed and furious Major, salaamed low and penitentially to the stone, bent again and again with humble, deprecatory gestures, and a frightened hurricane of propitiatory formulas, an inchoate sing-song of throaty, guttural words that sounded half wailing woe, half cringing prayer. And the people no longer shrank away, but pressed towards Major Crespin brandishing fists and weapons, and storming determinedly, "Oo-ae, oo-ae, gak-kok-oo-ae, gak-gak!"

Crespin's red face turned white in his anger, his tired eyes stiffened and flashed, and quicker than told his hand lay on his revolver-case. He still smoked on imperturbably, but Yazok was nearer death than he ever had been.

"Confound you, take care what you're doing!" Crespin warned him, snapping the words out coldly from between clenched teeth. "You'd better treat us civilly or—"

Basil Traherne broke in. "Gently, gently, Major," he begged with a hand on Crespin's right arm. "This is evidently some sort of sacred enclosure, and you were sitting on one of the gods."

"Well," Crespin retorted with a vexed, contemptuous laugh, "damn him, he might have told me!"

Lucilla smiled for the first time, and drew close to her husband, but her eyes were frightened and her heart was pounding. But Lucilla Crespin matched her pluck with theirs—she who had the most to live for, and the most to make her welcome death.

"If he had," Traherne expostulated, "you wouldn't have understood. The fellow seems to be the priest—you see, he's begging the god's pardon."

"If I knew his confounded lingo I'd jolly well make him beg mine," Crespin retorted with a murderous scowl at the still penancing, groveling priest, as oblivious of them in the stress of his penitential perturbation as if they'd been three ants in a crack of the rocks.

"But you don't know his lingo," Mrs. Crespin said, rather as if she did not regret it, and moving away cautiously but curiously towards the other side of the enclosure.

"We'd better be careful not to tread on their corns," Traherne urged. "We have Mrs. Crespin to think of."

Antony's face knotted and crimsoned again. "Damn it, sir," he growled rudely, "do you think I don't know how to take care of my wife?"

"I think you're a little hasty, Major, that's all," Traherne replied pleasantly. "These are evidently queer people, and we're dependent on them, you know, to get out of our hobble."

Crespin scowled and smoked on moodily, but made no reply. Some men, and not bad sorts at that, who

knew him as Traherne did, might have felt inclined to throttle him as he sat there, surly, quarrelsome and ungrateful—a positive menace to them all in their grave predicament, the man who had ruined the life of the woman Traherne loved—as far as one human being can wreck the life of another—who had spoiled her joy, sullied her mind, and made of her radiant young wifehood a sour memory that ached and reeked; the man whose bloated, degenerated being stood the only barrier between Traherne and the woman he longed for, as only clean, upright men of scrupulous life can long—if the roué but knew what he misses of nature's greatest impulse!—the man to whom Traherne had ministered unflaggingly for hard, patient years, between whose self and its worst parts and the impending consequences of ill-doing Traherne had stood persistently. But Basil Traherne had no such impulse. Towards Antony Crespin he had no harsher feeling than pity and sympathy. He pitied Lucilla and grieved for her, but his pity and grief for the husband were more. For his science told him that the recreant man's plight and misery were greater than the guiltless woman's. The physician *knew*. And he was true to his vocation—the vocation than which earth has none higher and finer. Traherne knew what Crespin's life-long handicap had been—ancestral taint, youth misguided and unprotected, and he did not judge the other who had succumbed to a strain and propensities that he himself, so circumstanced and tainted, might have succumbed to as completely and more. And, too, Traherne knew—for he had seen—as Lucilla willfully blind and incapacitated by nature never had seemed to see—how heroically Antony again and again had stood naked in Ephesus and fought his own soul

beasts—knew and honored him for it. And the physician knew, as no lay mind can, the terrible provocation of torn, jumping nerves; and he sometimes, though without blaming her, wondered that Mrs. Crespin had not realized at least something of this. But nerves are the one part of masculine anatomy of which few women take any account, and of which such women as Lucilla Crespin take less than none—incapable always of intrinsic justice to the sex which they somewhat arrogantly judge by their own imperious and narrowed, if "nice," standards, rather than by the measure nature has set. What Antony had done to her and her children she computed hotly over and over, but she gave less than a fair thought and pity to what he had done to himself, and made no mark at all of what he'd resisted. Dr. Traherne did, and he scanned Antony Crespin with a gentleness that was both masculine and splendid—and, because of his passion of heart, soul and body for the other's wife, was heroic and fine. Lucilla Crespin would have been amazed could she have known how the scales of Traherne's judgment weighed her and Antony against each other; and, being a woman, her resentment would have been more than her surprise.

Dr. Traherne loved Lucilla Crespin with the one man-love of his life; but he did not overrate her, and still less did he credit her with attributes and abilities that nature had denied her. For Major Crespin Traherne had little love left perhaps—but he had *some,* and far more than a meaner soul could have understood—and he had big, yearning pity. No matter how tender such men are to all womanhood, the wreck of manhood always must seem to such men as Traherne a deeper tragedy than any feminine suffering. And one

thing else weighed with him on Crespin's side of the balancing scales: Lucilla had and would hold the love and admiration of their children; Antony would lose it, if he lived. And Traherne sensed how intensely Crespin loved his youngsters. Lucilla did not. The Edelweiss keeps its admirable purity high up in the cold of the inscrutable Alps, the clover bloom is bruised and stained in the wayside dirt; but why praise the Edelweiss, why, in Heaven's name, blame the clover "low i' the dust"? Draggled and broken, the clover-head still gives a perfume, shows a color the unsmirched flower in the ice and snow forever lacks. And, if Traherne never forgot—what every physician knows—that "to step aside is human," he not only pitied Crespin for all in the older man that was faulty and weak, he also liked and respected him for what was strong and good. And there was much.

Antony Crespin's wife was unhappy; she needed no added heartache, but she might have been unhappier yet, had she seen her husband as Dr. Traherne saw him.

Certainly the world would be a far duller place if we all were as fair-minded as Basil Traherne, and if life carried no privilege and zest of censure. You'd be less contented and comfortable, if you did not think that you were better than I am, and I should be less comfortable and contented, if I did not know that I am better than you are.

CHAPTER XV

THE priest still apologized to the stone. The people still jabbered and watched. Crespin smoked on, and Traherne stood quietly studying the place—the lay of its land, the stand of the rocks, the length and strength of the castle walls.

"Do you think I could sit on this stone without giving offense to the deities?" Lucilla called to them over her shoulder.

Traherne answered her after a glance at the flat rock to which she pointed—a slab of flint quite without vestments of green or of paint.

"Oh, yes, that seems safe enough. I don't know," he continued, joining her where she sat, but not sharing her seat, and speaking in a tone that Crespin could not fail to hear, "how to apologize for having got you into this mess."

"Don't talk nonsense, Dr. Traherne," she answered cheerfully. "Who can foresee a Himalayan fog?"

"The only thing to do was to get above it, and then, of course, my bearings were gone." He still spoke apologetically—and unconsciously he dropped his voice as he said it, as every man's instinct is when he says even the most trivial things to the one woman. Crespin caught the tone's lowering, and shifted about a little where he sat, and listened the more intently.

"Now that we are safe," Lucilla's voice was not lowered at all, "I should think it all great fun, if it weren't for the children."

"Oh, they don't expect us for a week," Crespin

edged in, "and surely it won't take us more than that to get back to civilization." He spoke with more confidence than he felt.

And Basil Traherne felt less. The more he studied the place they'd landed on and the people, the less he thought of the chances of cordial hospitality or of quick and easy departure. But there was no use in saying so to Crespin here and now, and there was every reason for not saying or hinting it to Mrs. Crespin at all, unless a positive necessity compelled. But the next few days or hours might show brighter than his fears. God grant it! So he merely said, not too sanguine at heart, cheerful of voice, "Or at all events to a telegraph line," and he marshaled a cheerful smile with his words. A man has a right to be cheerful as long as he can. And men of Traherne's breed hold it a duty—a duty not to be shirked. If to borrow trouble is folly, to lend or impose it is crime.

"I suppose there's no chance of flying back?" Mrs. Crespin asked more anxiously than she knew.

"Not the slightest, I'm afraid," Traherne admitted. "I fancy the old bus is done for."

"Oh, Dr. Traherne, what a shame! And you'd only had it a few weeks!" Her concern for the wrecked aeroplane was entirely sincere, but something bigger than that throbbed at her side and shook her voice just a little. The men were thoroughly frightened, and she sensed it and shared it. But her fear was far less than theirs; she knew Asia less, and she had two men beside her, men of her own race, one whom she trusted in all things, the other her husband. And only very small women can feel as sick a fear when companioned by men, as men feel who know them

selves but inadequate protection for a woman who shares grave peril with them.

"And you'd only had it a few weeks," she repeated.

"What does it matter so long as you are safe?" Traherne exclaimed with an uncontrollable impulse that his voice betrayed far more than the words did. It was love-making, his tone, and the woman is greatly loved to whom a strong man speaks with passionate tenderness at a time of desperate peril.

Lucilla threw up an instant barrier—for his protection, not for her own. And though she had no fear of Antony—such women do not fear the men they despise—she had intense fear of the shame of what he might say might cause her—and cause Traherne.

"What does it matter so long as we're all safe?" she said quite lightly, almost gayly.

But Antony Crespin had caught the full significance of Traherne's impulsive words. And, "That's not what Traherne said," he jibed bitterly. "Why pretend to be blind to his chivalry?"

Lucilla Crespin paled with anger, Traherne reddened with regret. He knew now that Crespin knew, and he knew that he had tortured him, inflicting a needless pain—the last blunder or malpractice any true physician should forgive himself. He tried to laugh it off —knowing how poor and tepid the poultice was.

"Of course I'm glad you're all right, Major, and I'm not sorry to be in a whole skin myself. But ladies first, you know."

But Crespin would not be balked. "The perfect knight errant, in fact!" he snarled.

"Decidedly errant!" Traherne laughed. He had himself well in hand now, and he meant that nothing

should betray him again. It was enough that he had brought the woman into such acute and odious peril; she should be subjected to no petty annoyances through him. And he blamed himself, not Crespin. And Antony Crespin looked murderous now.

"Won't you *look* at the machine, and see if it's quite hopeless?" Mrs. Crespin urged, and the look she gave was both an imperious command and an entreaty.

"Yes," Traherne nodded, "at once." And he went instantly, went towards the wreck of the aeroplane, and passed out of sight behind the rocks.

It is difficult for the Oriental mind to believe that a man of a race other than theirs is braver than they —and the hillsmen of Central Asia have little cause to believe it. The bleached man was going back to look at the terrible bird-beast; well, they would go too. If the thing wounded or dead, or merely resting even, would not harm him, it could not hurt them. He was only one, they were many. And they had their weapons. So they followed in the wake of his heels, not following too closely, not crowding upon him in the least—but they followed—too proud to show the excitement they felt, but inwardly quivering with curiosity—followed as close as their grim mountain pride would permit, intent upon the marvel of the great air-beast.

But they had no need to hush their words, or to veil their interest. Basil Traherne took no heed of them. He stood beside his ruined toy and pride, and his hands knotted, and so did his throat. His mouth stiffened. His eyes filled. "What does it matter?" he had said to the woman; and there, on the other side of the absurd temple, with his eyes on her, and her eyes on his, it had not mattered at all. But it

mattered now. It mattered terribly. He stood and looked down on his comrade and dead, and he was shaken as a sailor who sees his ship go down to the deep, as a soldier who holds his pistol to the horse that has borne him in many a battle, and still nozzles its master's hand while the blood drips and clots from the panting flank the enemy's shell has disemboweled. His poor old bus! His dear old bus! For the first time since the day he'd met her among the roses of Kathleen Agnew's bamboo-shaded garden Lucilla Crespin was nothing to him. He had forgotten her. It is like that with men at such moments. And the women who know men best and value them most, resent it the least. Very wise women do not resent it at all. The sportsman to his sport! Such men make the staunch lovers, when love's turn comes.

CHAPTER XVI

THE clustering hillsmen followed Traherne, but Yazok, the temple priest, did not. His penance and oblations done at last, he stood immovable, his deep-set, inimical eyes fixed, cold and narrowed, on Crespin and Lucilla.

With eyes even more venomous Major Crespin watched Traherne out of sight. Then he seated himself with a bulky, determined assertion of a right—a proprietor's right—beside his wife on the broad flat stone.

She took no notice.

"Well, Lucilla!" he said. There was insult in the tone, and there was pain and appeal. The insult was veiled; the pain and appeal were not. But the woman heard the accusation, and was deaf to the cry.

"Well?" she answered indifferently, and without looking at him.

He fumbled for another cigarette, saying, "That was a narrow squeak!"

"Yes, I suppose so," she said, still more indifferently. It lashed him and he winced, because he knew that her indifference was for him, and not for the accident or for their plight, and because he thought that she had meant him to know that it was. Crespin was wrong there—she did not care whether he knew, or what he knew, and she cared even less what he felt.

"All's well that ends well, eh?" he persisted, looking at her ominously through gloomy, blood-shot eyes.

"Of course," she said listlessly.

"You don't seem very grateful to Providence." He would not leave her alone.

"For sending the fog?" his wife returned contemptuously.

"For getting us down safely—all three," Crespin corrected her, with a significant emphasis on the last two words.

Lucilla Crespin took the gauntlet up then. "It was Dr. Traherne's nerve that did that," she told him, looking him full in the face. He had been watching her narrowly, hungrily too, all the time, but she had not given him a glance till now. "If he hadn't kept his head—"

"We should have crashed. I wish to God we had. One or other of us would probably have broken his neck; and, if Providence had played up, it might have been the right one."

His wife swung round to him at that, as they sat, "What do you mean?" she demanded.

"It might have been me," he told her in a harsh, smoldering voice. "Then you'd have thanked God right enough!"

The woman caught the insinuation and held it squarely. But the pain and the prayer she did not hear—or, if she heard, she scorned to heed. There is no other mercilessness so hard and cold as that of one ultra type of good woman. Lucilla Crespin was of that type—now. Her days of forgiveness and bending had passed—at least for him. Ancestry had so predisposed her, and the last bad years had frozen it in. Should her boy live to sin as his father had sinned, probably the flood-gates of understanding and pity would open again, and grief and womanliness sweeten her soul again—but never again for the man beside

her. Had her heart stirred to him now, far as he'd gone, she might have saved and remanned him. But her heart was dead to him, as hard and unresponsive as the flint on which they sat.

That they quarreled here—for it *was* quarrel bitter and violent, for all the yearning in him, for all her high-bred self-control—that they *could* quarrel here, after such an adventure and mishap as they had just shared, in the thick of such unfathomed peril as they were sharing, showed what the breach between them meant to them both—despair and soul-damnation to the man, love and comradeship quite dead to the woman. It was hopeless—the life-split and abyss, or else the hours they'd just come through, the peril they'd escaped, the less-known, and for that the more unnerving peril that menaced them now as they sat side by side on the stone, must have reunited and reconciled them.

Lucilla Crespin faced her husband squarely, more in unveiled contempt than in courage or in injured pride. "Why," she complained impatiently, "will you talk like this, Antony? If I hadn't sent Dr. Traherne away just now, you'd have been saying these things in his hearing."

"Well, why not?" Crespin retorted hotly. "Don't tell me he doesn't know all about the 'state of our relations,' as they say in the divorce court."

"If he does, it's not from me," the wife said coldly, then added sourly: "No doubt he knows what the whole station knows."

What the whole station knew! Aye, there was the rub—the blistering rub to her woman's pride and shame, the galling, smarting rub to the man's. How often life's chasms could be bridged, even its cess-

pools purged and sweetened, if only no others knew. Lucilla said it not unnastily, all the more so for the high-bred quality of civility and self-control with which she spoke. A husband's faults—not even the unbearable fault of infidelity—never in themselves bear on a woman so crushingly and painfully as does having others know of them. For a husband's sins and malodorous peccadilloes are the damnable hall-mark of a wife's failure, branded on her soul and her flesh in a festering sore that never heals, and that all can see. Thousands of women go to the scaffold of the divorce court because what others know compels them. Lucilla Crespin knew what it had cost her that the whole station knew, but she gave no thought at all to what it had cost Antony. Only the highest souls realize and accept that he who sins is far more to be pitied, aye, and loved, if love is what the highest human passion should be, than is the one against whom the sinner has sinned.

"And what does the whole station know?" Crespin demanded. His eyes blazed through their blear, and the hand on his knee trembled. "What does the whole station know? Why, that your deadly coldness drives me to drink!" His voice broke just a little. "I've lived for three years in an infernal clammy fog like that we've passed through. Who's to blame if I take a whiskey peg now and then, to keep the chill out? Who?"

"Oh, Antony, why go over it all again?" She half rose, and then, as if it were not worth while to move, sank back as she'd been. "You know very well it was drink—and other things—that came between us; not my coldness, as you call it, that drove you to drink."

"Oh," Crespin cried in a rasping voice, "you good women! You patter after the parson, 'Forgive us as we forgive those who trespass against us.' But you don't know what forgiveness means. 'Plaster saints' every one of you, your vaunted Christianity to be shattered at the first hammer-tap of what you don't like. Blind to every fault of your own, fiendish and merciless to every fault of another, if it happens to nick you on your own petty raw. Damn such 'good women,' I say. You'll make a fine show on Judgment Day when you file up one by one to have your sins forgiven even as you have forgiven us poor rotten scum that have trespassed against you. You—you don't know your own faults, I tell you. You take them for virtues, even when they smell to heaven. You have no faults, you, you scourgers of others, not a fault of your own. Forgiveness! You don't know what it means. You're not fit to know!"

Never had Antony Crespin spoken to her so before. The force of his terrible passion reached her, but not its meaning. She heard the storm, and she saw its wreck: knotting muscles, quivering nostrils, wild, agonized eyes. But its pathos never reached her. He cried out to her for bread—new, clean, white bread, and she pitched a stone of contempt into his outstretched hand. Perhaps, if Basil Traherne had not been there behind the rock—perhaps, if she and Traherne had never met—Antony Crespin's wife might have heard his appeal and responded to it in his hour of utmost need, utmost abasement—for that was what his outburst of rage and accusation was: shame, longing, the old, old cry for one more chance.

But Lucilla was dead now to any need or appeal of his. Well, he had earned it. Alas, for life's

heaviest tragedy—we usually have. We earn what we get—most of us—and, sweet heaven help us! we get it. God does not always pay on Saturday—but He pays.

Mrs. Crespin, her eyes strained for what might come from the Raja's castle, her ears strained to catch Traherne's returning footsteps, answered his words, but only his words.

"What's the use of it, Antony?" she said drearily. "Forgive? I have forgiven you. I don't try to take the children from you, though it might be better for them if I did. But to forgive is one thing, to forget another. When a woman has seen a man behave as you have behaved, do you think it is possible for her to forget it, and to love afresh? There are women in novels, and perhaps in the slums, who have such short memories; but I am not one of them."

"No, by God, you're not!" And at the passion in the Englishman's voice, Yazok the priest, still watching them steadily, moved a little. "So a whole man's life is to be ruined—"

"Do you think yours is the only life to be ruined?" She, too, moved as she spoke, and left an inch or two more space between them on the stone where they both still sat, Crespin too shaken to rise, she too indifferent.

He had forgotten where they were, forgotten their danger even. The woman had not. She thrust her chin in her palms, her elbows on her knees, and searched the path to the castle with anxious eyes. Her nerves were aching now with the strain of delay and uncertainty, and because her nerves ached so, she prodded back at him again with her vicious question, viciously asked, "Do you think yours is the only life to be ruined?"

Crespin crouched over towards her like some jungle

beast crouching to spring. "Ah!" he snapped. "There we have it! I've not only offended your sensibilities; I'm in your way. You love this other man, this model of all the virtues!"

His wife made no pretense of not understanding him. "You have no right to say that," she said simply.

Crespin disregarded her protest—if it was protest she had deigned to make—as he must have disregarded any interruption now that was less than some yielding, some warming of hers.

"He's a paragon!" he pounded on. "He's a wonder! He's a mighty microbe-killer before the Lord; he's going to work heaven knows what miracles, only he hasn't brought them off yet. And you're cursing the mistake you made in marrying a poor devil of a soldier-man instead of a first-class scientific genius. Come! Make a clean breast of it! You may as well!"

One word from her—just one word of denial—would have healed and helped him, and she knew, at least, that it would have slaked his angry fever. But she did not give that cup of cold water; perhaps because she held truth too sacred—the virtues are an almost supreme asset, but they can be terribly cruel, and they should not be made of cast-iron—perhaps because she had for him too little kindness left.

"Come on, Lu," he urged. "Tell me. Do."

"I have nothing to answer," she returned without troubling to look at him even. "While I continue to live with you, I owe you an account of my actions—but not of my thoughts."

"Your actions? Oh, I know very well you're too cold—too damned respectable—to kick over the traces. And then you have the children to think of."

"Yes," the wife said sadly. "I have the children to think of. I have the children."

"Besides," Crespin went on, torturing himself, which is the success that often crowns our efforts to torture others, "there's no hurry. If you only have patience for a year or two, I'll do the right thing for once, and drink myself to death."

A year or two more of his cups! That would be hard and long to bear. Again and again she had felt that she had reached her tether's taut-pulled length—and then again and again she had tried once more. Why was Traherne so long? She had asked him to look at the crashed aeroplane, not to build a new one. Or, was it possible, the wreck was less hopeless than he'd thought, and already he was seeing a way to patch and repair? When would some word or move be made from the great sullen castle-place, with its gray turrets and scalloped arches turning to silver and pink now as the Asian sun slipped down the sapphire sky? A year or two more! And the children, still babies of course, were growing so. What might not Ronny notice and understand in another two years? Two years more! She never had measured before in her mind the probable stretch of the bad time still before her—and only for one instant did the thought come to her now—and Antony himself had put it there. His death was the one way out she never had thought of. And she would not think of it now. And even she spoke a little more kindly than she had done for some time—at least when they had been alone—and she turned and looked at him with almost a friendly look in her eyes, as she said:

"You have only to keep yourself a little in hand to live to what they call 'a good old age.'"

The friendliness in her eyes maddened him anew—it was not her friendship he wanted—but even so he was grateful for it, it was so much better than nothing to go on with—and he pressed his hurt and anger out of sight, and, leaning away from her the better to watch her face, said slowly:

"'Pon my soul, I've a mind to try to, though goodness knows, my life is not worth living," for he had caught the distraction on her face; she was listening, but not most to him. "I was a fool to come on this crazy expedition——"

"Why, it was yourself that jumped at Dr. Traherne's proposal," his wife reminded him.

"I thought we'd get to the kiddies a week earlier. They'd be glad to see me, poor little things. They don't despise their daddy."

Something of what he felt, something of what he still *was*—in spite of whatever he'd *done*—reached Antony Crespin's wife then. He had always loved his children—there was no doubt of that. It had not served him for strength enough, even as his love of her had not, but he always had loved them, invariably he had been tender to them. And Lucilla remembered it now.

"It shan't be my fault, Antony," she told him gently, "if they ever do." And then she spoilt it, soured the grace she had shown, by adding with a weary sigh, "But you don't make it easy to keep up appearances." O curse of woman's tongue!

Antony Crespin rose to his feet, and stood before her. He saw the natives clustered just over there, screening the projecting wing of the broken aeroplane; he saw Yazok watching, sentineling too, perhaps; he saw the great *puissant* fortified castle, he recalled where

they were, he knew their peril—but for all that, for all that or more, he gave not one damn. . . . He stood there before her, alone in the world with his wife, all his imperfections on his back, and put up his plea.

"Oh, Lu, Lu," he begged, "if you would treat me like a human being—if you would help me, and make life tolerable for me, instead of a thing that won't bear looking at except through the haze of drink—we might retrieve the early days. God knows I never cared two pins for any woman but you——"

It was the acutest moment of Antony Crespin's life. And his wife turned him down.

"No," she said, "the others, I suppose, only helped you, like whiskey, to see the world through a haze. I saw the world through a haze when I married you; but you have dispelled it once for all." She saw his face blanch, she saw his fingers knot, she saw his shoulders sag; but she went on. "Don't force me to tell you how impossible it is for me to be your wife again. I am the mother of your children—that gives you a terrible hold over me. Be content with that."

CHAPTER XVII

"OH, Mrs. Crespin," Traherne called before they saw him clambering down from the rocks where the ruined bus lay. "I've found," he called as he came in sight, "in the wreck the newspaper you spoke of—you were right about Rukh."

Major Crespin pulled himself up roundly, he was not of the breed to show his hurt to the other man. "What does it say?" he asked briskly, as Traherne came up to them with the paper in his hand.

Traherne unfolded it, found the place, and read, "'Abdulabad, Tuesday. Sentence of death has been passed on the three men found guilty of the murder of Mr. Haredale. It appears that these miscreants are natives of Rukh, a small and little-known independent state among the northern spurs of the Himalayas.'"

"Yes," Lucilla nodded, "that's what I read."

"This news isn't the best possible passport for us in our present situation," Traherne said gravely, and his face was graver than his words.

"But," Mrs. Crespin protested reassuringly, "if we're hundreds of miles from anywhere, it can't be known here yet."

"One would think not," Traherne assented.

"In any case, they wouldn't dare to molest us," Major Crespin said nonchalantly across the fresh cigarette he was lighting.

Traherne shot him a sharp look. Did Crespin for one moment believe that? Or was he trying to reassure his wife? The latter no doubt, Traherne concluded.

"All the same," the physician said—and following Crespin's lead by saying it lightly, "it might be safest to burn this paragraph, in case there's anybody here that can read it." And he suited action to words, lighting at Crespin's cigarette the strip of paper he tore out carefully, watching it burn until it licked at his fingers, and he had to drop the flaming fragment. But he watched it burn to the last ash, and then stamped upon that. Lucilla watched it too—they all did, and Yazok the priest watched most intently of all.

Mrs. Crespin held out her hand for the rest of the newspaper, and when Traherne gave it she went and put it with her leather coat where it lay on a rock as Traherne had placed it.

"Hullo!" Crespin held up a hand.

Strange ululations, mingled with the throb of tom-toms and the clash of cymbals were faintly heard from the distance—faint, but growing clearer and clearer, from the mountain-path up which the runner had sped at the priest's command.

"Hullo!" the Major repeated. "What's this?"

"Sounds like the march of the Great Panjandrum," Traherne murmured.

It certainly did; and it looked even more than it sounded, when it swept and pranced into sight.

The natives all ran to the point where the path debouched on the open space. All their lives they had seen their Raja come, as had their fathers, and theirs before them, and as often as not keeping just such state, but they never tired of the spectacle, and it never failed to move them. The rustle of satisfaction which is the Oriental equivalent of our "loud cheering," and, by the way, very much more eloquent, swept through them like a gust of gentle wind in a field of well-ripe corn;

then, as their prince came nearer, they prostrated themselves on each side of his way. They were delighted to see him, and exquisitely proud of his gorgeous and noised display, but not a face relaxed, all were inordinately grave, as too were the harlequin mobbery that preceded and followed his litter. Except in China and Burmah, merriment is not the Asian's idea of enjoyment, and very rarely its expression. Even the babies are grave. But, for all that, the tatterdemalion Rukh populace were enjoying themselves intensely.

It was a wild procession that came down the mountain path. A gigantic negro, flourishing two great naked sabers, and gyrating in a barbaric war-dance, headed it. His sole garment was a tiger's skin slung over one shoulder and falling apron-wise over one breast down to a little below his waist, his sole ornament a wide head-band of brass in which one great red stone burned. Six music-men followed him, beating their tom-toms and clashing their cymbals till the very air winced. They wore less than the ebon major-domo did, but what their crimson loin cloths lacked in quantity they made up in color, and they were flaked with chips of purple, green and yellow glass, and the musicians' great, sinewy arms were hung with bells. And most of the runners who padded lightly behind them tinkled too as they walked. The short-distance runners, sent only about the capital itself, to and fro from the palace on the Raja's errands, wore no bells, but the many more who were sent all over the kingdom, and even beyond it, each wore many tiny but noisy bells; for all Asia knows that wild beasts fear the sound of bells as they fear nothing else, and will flee from the

path of the panting runner who tinkles and rings as he goes.

A half score of men, clad to their heels in spotless flowing white, each with a flat hat with wide, tightly rolled brim, each hat of a different costly brocade, came next, and close behind them was carried the Raja's palanquin. It looked something like a Chinese bride-chair, but its gauze-hung sides were not opaque; it looked something like a Burmese pagoda, for its gilded, pointed roof rose above it on much the same lines as does the great pile at Mulmien. It looked a little like a high-carried boat; and not a little like a grotesque howdah, one corner of its canopy-roof upheld by a glittering, bright blue monkey, one by a writhing green-eyed vermilion snake, one by a twisted white and pink pelican, the other by an elaborate square pillar of sandal-wood, whose carvings simulated bamboos and tulips. It looked something like a super pantomime-chair; and it looked, as it was, a thing of great cost, and of the almost life-long labor of many skilled and patient craftsmen.

The seated figure inside it showed but indistinctly through the gauzy film of the litter's curtains; a human figure undoubtedly, and in perfect repose, but instinct with power—a blur of turquoise and rose, of heliotrope and saffron, of silk and satin and tinsel and gems. Immediately behind him came the strangest sight in Rukh—an English valet, if ever one was in Mayfair—an immaculate, demure, correct valet who might have strolled into the picture from St. James Street, and as unmoved, detached and imperturbable there in the Eastern glare and din as if the gyrating negro had been a white-gloved constable on point-duty, the prostrate half-naked crowd a well-dressed, leisurely mêlée

of shoppers, or just come from Burlington House, and the musicians before and the guards and rabble behind buses and taxis on Piccadilly and Albemarle Street.

Behind Watkins, for his name was as English as his coat, came the Raja's bodyguard, or a considerable detachment of it—grim-faced, high-cheeked men of all heights and shapes, dressed in the most fantastic and parti-colored attire that men-at-arms ever wore yet: short sleeveless jackets of velvet, jackets of silk that were all sleeves, pleated petticoats of chintz and of shantung silk, trousers of red and yellow woolens, bare brown, hairy legs, and legs spiraled with puttee-like twistings, some of exquisite embroideries, some of time-tarnished rags. Some wore upturned-toed sandals, some were shod but with studs on their toes or a ring of jade on one ankle or on both. One wore a helmet, one carried an umbrella, several wore caps—caps made of fur, of brocade or of sheer white "chicken-work"— one bare head was perfectly bald, one wore a dancing mop of densely oiled corkscrew curls. Several wore long chains of barbaric beads that clacked as they moved, one wore a collar of glass-jeweled tin; two were turbaned. All were armed with antique match-locks, some of them with barrels six or seven feet long; and one carried a tame, monster-sized rat on his naked shoulder, and three had marigolds stuck behind their ears, which was where two carried cheroots. Six boys, wearing long yellow skirts but nothing above them, brought up the rear. Two carried big, squat, lighted braziers, lest even in this heat their lord be cold; four, lest he be warm, carried huge long-handled fans of peacocks' feathers and others of glass-sprinkled braided sweetgrass.

The bearers put the litter down deferentially, directly

in front of the temple, and knelt down behind it with their faces to the ground.

Lucilla Crespin, for all her anxiety, wanted to laugh at this raree-show. She'd seen it done better at a Drury Lane pantomime!

But Crespin and Traherne had less impulse to laugh, or to smile. They suspected something of the strength that might lurk in the tigerish claws underneath the ridiculous gloves of tinsel.

The man in Bond Street clothes came at once, with a padded, cat-like tread to the side of the resting litter, parted its curtains, and held down obsequiously a crooked broadcloth arm through which, as it rose, the seated figure put a slim brown hand.

The Raja stepped out, released his servitor's arm, and made just a step towards the three Europeans, scanning the men lightly and in silence—not seeming to see Mrs. Crespin.

He was tall, well-built, about forty, Traherne thought, and the two Englishmen knew from his jewels that, whatever his people were, the Raja of Rukh was fabulously rich. His diamonds were good—the big blue one that winked on his forehead were hard to match anywhere; his emeralds were fine—they lay, a green, snake-like rope, on his richly furred, coral and jewel buttoned satin coat, and cascaded down to the knees of his wide velvet trousers; the aigrette in his cap-like turban was worth a great deal, and it must have plumed the head of a wonderfully virile bird, or else have been marvelously wired, for its every delicate thread stood erect in spite of the jewel that topped and weighted it; and the great turquoise from which it rose was almost a plaque. The princely shoes were a blaze of gems, one blue with sapphires, one red as a pigeon's blood

with rubies finer than Burmah ever quarries. But all this was little to the pearls. Tassels of pearls hung from his ears and his sleeves and their cuffs. Seven great ropes of pearls hung about his neck and over his shoulders—pearls such as Europe does not see overoften, and never in such quantities; one rope fell below his long-skirted coat almost to his trousers' hem, one shorter strand was of pink pearls perfectly matched; a necklace of "black" pearls lay gray and soft across the breast of his turquoise blue coat, and from it hung one huge pear-shaped pearl so radiantly pink that it almost looked red as it touched the milk-white pearls below it —and every pearl of the many hundreds gleamed with the rainbow-burnish that some pigeons show on their jeweled necks.

The Raja's face was intelligent, his hands were beautiful, his tiny mustache had a silken look of Paris, his eyes were dark and inscrutable.

Mrs. Crespin thought him ridiculous, outrageously "trapped out" for even an uncivilized man. Antony Crespin, with the British soldier-man's impenetrable insularity, set him down "a hell of a nigger—what." But Basil Traherne, skilled in faces, in human frames and in gaits, thought that the Raja of Rukh had character and distinct and polished personality.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE Raja waited, cool, courteous and quite non-committal. And after an instant Crespin advanced and saluted.

The Eastern inclined his head—did it so slightly that it accorded permission rather than returned or gave salutation. He was dignified, and he was not ridiculous, Traherne thought, for all his satins and silks and glut of hanging jewels, as he stood there in front of his temple where the goats' heads still dripped sacrificial red, and his people about him.

"Does Your Highness speak English?" Crespin asked rather desperately—with almost a superior edge to his voice.

"Oh, yes, a little," the Rukh said in English as English as Crespin's own and in an accent even a little more irreproachable.

Crespin pulled himself together instantly, and said, speaking like a soldier and a man of breeding, "Then I have to apologize for our landing uninvited in your territory."

"Uninvited; but I assure you not unwelcome." The inclination of the bejeweled head was just a trifle more this time.

"We are given to understand," the soldier went on, "that this is the State of Rukh."

Just a hinted shadow of a smile touched the Raja's fine lips—a smile in little akin to the twitch or grimace that does the West for smiling, but a half-flicker that sometimes falls for a moment on high-bred Eastern

faces, just touching the mouth, but not made by it. "The Kingdom of Rukh," the Raja said smoothly. "Major—if I rightly read the symbols on your cuff—"

"Major Crespin," Antony stated, saluting again. "Permit me to introduce my wife."

The Raja of Rukh saw Mrs. Crespin for the first time—apparently. He salaamed profoundly, his obeisance to her as immediate and deep as his bend of the head to her husband had been slow and perfunctory. "I am delighted, Madam," he told her, "to welcome you to my secluded dominions. You are the first lady of your nation I have had the honor of receiving."

"Your Highness is very kind," Mrs. Crespin said, rising—Traherne was glad that she did that—and taking a half-step towards the glittering figure.

"And this," Crespin gestured, "is Dr. Basil Traherne, whose aeroplane—or what is left of it—you see."

The Raja smiled, more widely, more genially this time, and he and Traherne exchanged a direct, level look. "Dr. Traherne? The Doctor Traherne whose name I have so often seen in the newspaper? The Pasteur of Malaria?"

So this unexpected barbarian read the *Statesman* and the *Pioneer!* But of course, speaking the English he did, he would.

"The newspapers make too much of my work," Traherne disallowed. "It is very incomplete."

"Rome was not built in a day," the Raja laughed, "or the Taj. But you are an aviator as well."

"Only as an amateur," Traherne insisted.

The Raja let that pass. "I presume it is some misadventure—a most fortunate misadventure for me—that has carried you so far into the wilds beyond the Himalayas?"

"Yes," Traherne assented ruefully. "We got lost in the clouds. Major and Mrs. Crespin were coming up from the plains to see their children at a hill station—"

"Pahari, no doubt?"

"Yes, Pahari—and I was rash enough to suggest that I might save them three days' traveling, by taking them up in my aeroplane."

"Madam is a sportswoman, then?" The Raja turned to Lucilla.

"Oh, I have been up many times," she replied.

"Yes," Crespin said with a tinge of sarcasm under the words, "many times."

If Lucilla caught it, she gave no sign, and did not let it serve to swerve her from the subject. "It was no fault of Dr. Traherne's that we went astray," she told the Raja. "The weather was impossible."

A smile of a new significance came in the narrow black eyes, but was not allowed to touch his lips. "Well," he said amusedly, "you have made a sensation here, I can assure you. My people have never seen an aeroplane. They are not sure, simple souls"—he was laughing at them but there was affection in it, Traherne thought—"whether you are gods or demons. But the fact of your having descended in the precincts of a temple of our local goddess"—he motioned his hand towards the idol—"allow me to introduce you to her—is considered highly significant."

Traherne noted that he introduced them to the Green Goddess, and not her to them, and he wondered if this man with his priceless gew-gaws, his cosmopolitan breeding and information, his countless centuries of Eastern ancestry, were as apart from the beliefs and idolatrous superstitions of his uncouth people as his words and light tone implied. Well, he would to

heaven they could cut all this useless talk, and get down to the real issue now. Their fate still hung in the balance—his and Crespin's—*and* Lucilla's. It was not a comfortable feeling. It was very far from a comfortable situation. And he knew how scrupulous the politeness of an Oriental foe-to-the-death could be. But he knew too that they must bide this Raja man's time and tune.

Antony Crespin knew it too, and Lucilla had the wit to take her cue from them. But Crespin glanced at the lowering sun, and ventured, "I hope, sir, that we shall find no difficulty in obtaining transport back to civ— to India."

The Raja of Rukh smiled openly then, and his smile was frank and very sweet. "To civilization, you were going to say? Why hesitate, my dear sir? We know very well that we are barbarians. We are quite reconciled to the fact. We have had some five thousand years to accustom ourselves to it. This sword—" he laid a hand lightly on his carved and jeweled scimitar —"is a barbarous weapon compared with your revolver; but it was worn by my ancestors when yours were daubing themselves blue, and picking up a precarious livelihood in the woods." He said it in the friendliest way, and broke off abruptly, and turned to Mrs. Crespin, "But Madam is standing all this time!" he exclaimed in dismay. "Watkins, what are you thinking of? Some cushions!"

Watkins made no reply, and his well-trained face did not change, but he took several cushions from his master's litter, and came sleekly forward, and piled them into a seat for her.

"Another litter for Madam, and mountain chairs for the gentlemen, will be here in a few minutes. Then I

hope you will accept the hospitality of my poor house."

If the litter as well as the chairs already had been ordered, Watkins must have caught some other ciphered command in his master's voice, for the valet turned softly and said something to one of the people, and another runner sped quickly away.

"We are giving a great deal of trouble, Your Highness," Lucilla objected.

"A great deal of pleasure, Madam," the Raja corrected her.

"But I hope, sir," Crespin ventured again, "there will be no difficulty about transport back to—India." He was feeling deucedly uneasy, was the English Major, but he managed to keep it out of his voice.

Basil Traherne was feeling much uneasier, but he said nothing, gave no sign—and waited.

"Time enough to talk of that, Major," the Raja insisted gayly, "when you have rested and recuperated after your adventure. You will do me the honor of dining with me this evening? I trust you will not find us altogether uncivilized." It was courtly invitation, social entreaty even, but too it was princely command. The Englishmen recognized it, and obeyed it with a bow. Their anxiety raged, but their knees bent.

The woman took it up lightly. "Your Highness," she said to him, "will have to excuse the barbarism of our attire. We have nothing to wear but what we stand up in." And she made a delicate mouth at her tumbled tweed skirt and her warm, stout boots.

"Oh, I think we can put that all right," the Raja told her. "Watkins!"

"Your 'Ighness!" Watkins came to heel.

"You are in the confidence of our Mistress of the Robes. How does our wardrobe stand?"

"A fresh consignment of Paris models came in only last week, Your 'Ighness."

"Good! Then I hope, Madam, that you may find among them some rag that you will deign to wear."

"Paris models, Your Highness!" she exclaimed, speaking as lightly as he had. "And you talk of being uncivilized!"

"We do what we can, Madam," he returned with a bow. "I sometimes have the pleasure of entertaining European ladies"—Traherne turned aside as he bit at his lip, Crespin checked a frown—"though not, hitherto, Englishwomen—in my solitudes; and I like to mitigate the terrors of exile for them. Then as for civilization, you know, I have always at my elbow one of its most finished products. Watkins!"

"Your 'Ighness!" the finished product said in a voice that would have been sulky, had it dared, and he came forward with again a hint of slinking in his cat-like tread. Evidently the valet disliked this limelight.

"You will recognize in Watkins, gentlemen," the Raja explained, "another representative of the Ruling Race." Watkins touched his hat miserably to Crespin and Traherne, but he did not look at them. His eyes studied his shoes. "I assure you he rules me with an iron hand—not always in a velvet glove. Eh, Watkins?"

"Your 'Ighness will 'ave your joke," the valet said lamely.

But the master was merciless. "He is my Prime Minister and all my cabinet—but more particularly my Lord Chamberlain. No one can touch him at mixing a cocktail or making a salad. My entire household trembles at his nod; even my *chef* quails before him. Nothing comes amiss to him; for he is, like myself, a

man without prejudices. You may be surprised at my praising him to his face in this fashion; you may see some danger of—what shall I say?—swelled head. But I know my Watkins; there is not the slightest risk of his outgrowing that modest bowler. He knows his value to me, and he knows that he would never be equally appreciated elsewhere. I have guarantees for his fidelity—eh, Watkins?"

"I know when I'm well off, if that's what Your 'Ighness means," the man said, still without looking up.

"I mean a little more than that," the Raja said quietly; "but no matter. I have sometimes thought of instituting a peerage, in order that I might raise Watkins to it. But I mustn't let my admiration for British institutions carry me too far. . . . Those scoundrels of bearers are taking a long time, Watkins."

"The lady's litter 'ad to 'ave fresh curtains, Your 'Ighness," the servant explained. "They won't be a minute now." And desperately Watkins hoped it. He was the most impatient and not the least anxious there now.

CHAPTER XIX

BUT it was many a minute before the litter-bearers came.

The Raja turned to Crespin. "You were speaking of transport, Major—" then to Traherne, "Is your machine past repair, Dr. Traherne?"

"Utterly, I'm afraid."

"Let us look at it," the Raja suggested, and turning towards it he saw that his body-guard had broken rank, and all were clustered pell-mell on the path, looking in rather frightened amazement at the mangled plane. He gave a sharp, displeased word of command, and they scampered back into a sort of loose order, but even from the comparative distance they kept their anxious, puzzled eyes swung back to the aeroplane, and some of the boldest or less disciplined craned their bebeaded necks. "Ah, yes," the Raja said after a near glance, "propeller smashed—planes crumpled up—"

"Under carriage wrecked," Traherne prompted sadly.

"I'm afraid we can't offer to repair the damage for you," the Raja said, shaking his head.

"I'm afraid not, sir," the doctor answered grimly.

"A wonderful machine!" the Raja said enthusiastically, still looking it over. "Yes," he owned, "Europe has something to boast of. I wonder what the priest here thinks of it?" He turned with a laugh, and beckoned Yazok, and they spoke together in their own tongue, the Raja with a few short words, the priest with long guttural volubility profusely punctuated with

deep salaams. It was evident that temporal power exceeded the gods' in Rukh. The master dismissed the other almost as crisply as he had admonished the gaping body-guard, and turned with a smile of tolerance, if more contempt, again to Traherne. "He says," he translated, "it is the great roc—the giant bird, you know, of our Eastern stories. And he declared that he plainly saw his Goddess hovering over you as you descended, and guiding you towards her temple."

"I wish she could have guided us towards the level ground I saw behind your castle," Traherne said grimly. He felt no compulsion to speak more ceremoniously of her Green Goddesship than the Raja himself had. "I could have made a safe landing there."

"No doubt," the Raja nodded; "on my parade ground—almost the only level spot in my domains."

"These, I suppose," Mrs. Crespin, tired of her cushions, asked as she joined them, and caught his words, "are your body-guard?"

"My household troops, Madam," the potentate said with a bow.

"How picturesque they are!" she exclaimed.

The Raja laughed. "Oh," he said easily, "a relic of barbarism, I know. I can quite understand the contempt with which my friend the Major is at this moment regarding them."

Hearing him Crespin joined them too. "Irregular troops, Raja," he said; "often first-class fighting men."

"And you think," the Raja said quickly, "that, if irregularity is the virtue of irregular troops, these—what is the expression, Watkins?"

"Tyke the cyke, Your 'Ighness," the expatriated cockney supplied—but he kept his distance.

"That's it—take the cake—that's what you think, Major?"

"Well," Crespin owned, too taking his cue and tone from the cosmopolitan Raja's own, "they would be hard to beat, sir."

"I repeat," the ruler said gravely, "a relic of barbarism. You see, I have strong conservative instincts—I cling to the fashions of my fathers—and my people would be restive if I didn't. I maintain these fellows as his Majesty the King-Emperor keeps up the Beefeaters in the Tower. But I also like to move with the times, as perhaps you will allow me to show you." He lifted the silver whistle that hung at his coat, and blew on it two short blasts.

Instantly from behind every rock and shrub—from every bit of possible cover—there emerged a soldier, garbed in spick and span European uniform—almost identical with the uniform of a crack regiment of Imperial Russia—and faultlessly armed with the latest brand of magazine rifle. They saluted their prince, and then stood, their eyes on him, as immovable as statues at attention.

"Good Lord!" and Crespin added an involuntary whistle; and Traherne as involuntarily gasped, "Hallo!" But, if the Englishwoman shared their amazement she did not show it. She looked at the up-sprung troops quite calmly and casually. That surprised the Raja, and pleased him—quickened him even. There is no other quality that appeals to the high caste Oriental as inscrutability and imperturbability do—qualities of soul and of breeding that echo his own, and to which his own answer. He did not like Europeans, except an old friend or two of his English varsity days. But he felt that he could, if

opportunity served, like this Englishwoman—and the Raja of Rukh was accustomed and skilled to swing opportunity into his line. He said to her concernedly, "I trust I did not startle you, Madam?"

"Oh, not at all," she told him. "I am not nervous," and she looked him frankly and squarely in the eyes, as she sat carelessly down again on her seat of cushions.

His dark eyes kindled an instant, then he said lightly, "You, of course, realize that this effect is not original. I have plagiarized it from the excellent Walter Scott:

> 'These are the Clan-Alpine's warriors true,
> And, Saxon, I am Roderick Dhu!'

But I think you'll admit, Major, that my men know how to take cover!"

How typically Oriental, Traherne thought, incredible mixture of child and cool man of the world.

"By the Lord, sir," Crespin answered heartily, "they must move like cats—for you can't have planted them there before we arrived."

"No," the Raja reminded him with a laugh; "you had given me no notice of your coming."

"Perhaps the Goddess did," Lucilla said slyly.

Dr. Traherne felt a little anxious at that, but the Raja took her words in the best of good part. "Not she, Madam," he assured her, letting his brown-black eyes smile into hers for a moment. "She keeps her own counsel. These men followed me down from the palace, and have taken position while we have been speaking."

He gave one word of command, and the men, absolutely making no sound, rapidly assembled and formed in two ranks, an officer on their flank.

Crespin's once soldierly face glowed with admiration. His wife thought she had not for years seen him look so nearly his old self. "A very smart body of men, Raja," he said with blunt and evident admiration. "Allow me to congratulate you on their training."

"I am greatly flattered, Major." The Raja was delighted, and showed it gleefully—the child, so quick in every Oriental, hot on the surface. "I superintend it myself. . . . Ah, here comes the litter."

Down the path it came, four bearers carrying it evenly. Two chairs, each borne by two men, swung along behind it. As its bearers put the litter down, the Raja offered his hand to Mrs. Crespin with, "Permit me, Madam, to hand you to your palanquin."

As she rose she picked up her leather coat, and the newspaper dropped from its folds and fell to the ground. Traherne bit his lip. The Raja sprang to pick it up. "Pardon me, Madam," he said quickly, almost in a tone of command, and began to scan it. "A newspaper only two days old! That is such a rarity that you must allow me to glance at it." He opened it with a deferential gesture but with a determined hand, and a flick of something not too amicable glinted from his eyes as he saw that a strip had been torn from the back page. "Ah," he said softly, "the telegraphic news gone! What a pity! In my seclusion, I hunger for tidings from the civilized world."

Yazok the priest came closer and spoke to his prince eagerly, telling too in vivid pantomime Traherne's burning of the paper, and then pointed to the little blur of ashes still on the ground. The Raja looked at them slowly, lifted his eyes, and asked Traherne, smiling, "You burned this column?"

"Unfortunately, I did." Traherne had sensed rather

than caught the dislike, and even almost threat, in the suave Eastern voice.

"Ah!" the Raja said with a significance he did not choose or trouble to veil. Then, after a pause no one else quite cared to break, he added, with a show of gratitude that was very well done, if he was not sincere, "I know your motive, Dr. Traherne, and I appreciate it. You destroyed it out of consideration for my feelings, wishing to spare me a painful piece of intelligence. That was very thoughtful—almost, if I may say it, Orientally so—but quite unnecessary. I already know what you tried to conceal."

"You know!" and "Your Highness knows!" the two Englishmen said simultaneously, incredulously.

The Raja smiled slightly and bowed so. "Oh, I had not seen this excellent English journal—if I had, my eagerness to look at it would have been an indirection unworthy between friends, and quite unnecessary to me, I assure you—and I have not heard what comment the admirable editor of the *Leader* makes—or his leader writers—but I know that three of my subjects, accused of a political crime, have been sentenced to death."

"How is it possible—?" Traherne involuntarily began.

"Bad news flies fast, Dr. Traherne," the Raja replied. "And too—this is Asia," he added significantly. "But one thing you can perhaps tell me—is there any chance of their sentences being remitted?"

"I am afraid not, Your Highness," Traherne answered reluctantly. And whatever reluctance he did or did not feel at the fact, he was most sincerely reluctant to tell it to the Raja of Rukh.

"Remitted?" Crespin broke in brashly. "I should

rather say not. It was a cold-blooded, unprovoked murder!"

"Unprovoked, you think?" Rukh said evenly. "Well, I won't argue the point. And the execution is to be—?"

He had asked it pointedly of Traherne, and Traherne replied, still more reluctantly than he had before —and smothering a strong desire to throttle Antony Crespin: "I think to-morrow—or the day after." It might be worse than idle to lie to this man, who seemed uncannily provided with distant news.

"To-morrow, or the day after," the Raja said musingly. "Yes." Then, with even an added deference, he turned again to Lucilla. "Forgive me, Madam," he begged; "I have kept you waiting."

"Does Your Highness know anything of these men?" Traherne asked impulsively—and regretted instantly that he had.

Over his shoulder, looking Traherne full in the eyes, handing Mrs. Crespin carefully into the waiting litter, the Raja said very simply, "Know them? Oh, yes—they are my brothers." Then, without giving time for comment or commiseration, and in a manner that unmistakably but delicately brooked none, he seated himself in his own litter, and clapped his hands twice. The bearers lifted the litters and moved away with them slowly. Lucilla Crespin's went first, the Raja's close after, the well-trained regular soldiers lining the way in single rank, and saluting as the litters passed. Watkins the valet followed close at heel to his master's.

The Englishmen seated themselves in the chairs—there was no alternative.

"His brothers?" Crespin said uneasily as they did so. "What did he mean?"

"Heaven knows!" Traherne replied, shrugging his shoulders.

"I don't half like our host, Traherne," the Major grumbled from his chair. "There's too much of the cat about him."

"Or of the tiger," the other rejoined grimly. "And how the devil had he got the news?"

They were anxious—Basil Traherne the more so. And Lucilla Crespin's heart knocked oddly as she rode in her queen-like litter. But she sat at ease with an easy smile on her face—going to, as she perfectly well understood, what might prove either the most interesting experience of her life or a funeral march.

As the two chairs moved after the litters the two ranks of soldiers closed round them. The ramshackle irregulars, and the bizarre retinue, the dancing negro first, the musicians next, the rest pell-mell, brought up the ragged rear, and the gesticulating, still curious populace followed the retinue.

Only Yazok the priest remained, prostrating himself in thanksgiving before the Green Goddess, staying prostrate so, till slow hours had sped and the stark goat heads at her feet grew newly red in the last crimson rays of the fast sinking sun.

The quick Asian twilight came, and as it came was gone. The great stars came out in the crinkling sky, a baby moon laughed down on the temple precincts and the rotting marigolds. And still Yazok the high priest prostrated himself before the six-armed Goddess.

CHAPTER XX

WHAT were they to do? They were all three wondering that. There was nothing for them to do but mark time—and watch with alert eyes, ears open, and placid faces. They all realized it, and realizing it, did it thoroughly, like the Britons they were.

On and up the procession went to the palace gate, but with every rod they made the distance between the palanquins and the chairs was lengthened. It was not far, as that proverbial crow goes, but the way was hard and steep, it twisted, turned, zig-zagged and circled about itself like the railroad to Darjeeling, and like it went down almost as often as it went up, making the actual gain in ascent very gradual. Except for the rocks on either side, and the rose and snow-crested peaks beyond them there was little to see. But here and there a tiny hovel-like home clung desperately to the brown rocks, and twice where the rocks spread apart a little to flatness great lily-tanks had been contrived. They really were water-lily farms, the plants grown and tended for the food they supplied. The first and larger tank was snow-white, for the *Nymphæa nelumbo*—queen perhaps of all wild water-lilies—was in full blooming now, and, because it was between mid-day and sunset, every wonderful flower-cup was opened wide. When they died away in a few weeks their seed capsules would grow thousands of acorn-shaped, edible kernels, delicious when gathered green and roasted, valuable as winter food-store, to be

dried and eaten as nuts, or ground into flour for the lily-cakes upon which the people largely lived. The tank higher up was densely crowded with singara lilies, the water so hidden under the great green leaves that it looked a delicate sward flecked with brilliant snow blossoms. The singara nuts raw were a great delicacy, second—if second—only to the half-ripe beans of the lotus and tender leaf-stalks boiled and seasoned, and singara flour was a staple of peasant life.

Something animal was scrambling slowly, cautiously down a far mountain's knife-like edge—a caravan of the miracle-footed hill-ponies bringing luxuries from half the globe to the King of Rukh.

The long, twisted palace, when they reached it, was even larger and more impressive than Mrs. Crespin had thought. Whatever the interior might prove, the exterior was not unbeautiful; the details of the great open arches, some scalloped, some sharply pointed, no two quite alike, yet all in harmony with the others and with the splendid and panoramic mountain site, were beautiful and significant—they told a story of years of lavish labor and thought; and through several of the open arch spaces exquisite vistas of courtyards and pools, colonnades and gray, intricate walls showed cool and inviting.

The Raja helped the Englishwoman out of her litter as deferentially as he had assisted her into it. Servants hurried to meet them at the opened door—women among them, and at a flicker of the ruler's hand, one more handsomely dressed than the others came to Lucilla and salaamed before her.

"She will attend you to your apartments, Madam," the Raja said, "and wait upon you. She has my command to obey you in all things, and she will. You

will find her not unskillful, and she is trustworthy. She is yours."

Mrs. Crespin looked at the native woman searchingly, afraid to go, afraid to refuse to do so. The woman, uncommonly tall and most decidedly handsome, had a comfortable, not unkind face, Lucilla decided. But she temporized.

"I will wait until Major Crespin comes, I think, Your Highness."

"By no means," the potentate said smoothly. "See how far the gentlemen are behind us—and I cannot allow you to fatigue yourself farther than you already must have done to-day."

Lucilla still hesitated. The chairs were far in the distance. If she showed the fear she felt, how might it not anger this now smiling man who spoke to her so courtly, whose power was so absolute?

"Until dinner, Madam," he said, bowing low. But there was finality in his silken voice, and Lucilla Crespin, praying that she might choose of the perils swarming about her the least, turned and followed the swarthy ayah.

"Thank you," she said, "until dinner then, sir,"

The Raja bowed his approval, and turned away in another direction. She wondered that he did not wait to welcome Antony and Traherne—it would have been princelier, she thought, since he had so bidden their coming, so pressed his hospitality upon them—but it was relief that he showed no intention of dancing unwelcome attendance upon her. That was something. She shivered a little, and quietly followed the native woman.

Crespin looked quickly about for his wife when at

last his bearers put down his chair, and he lumbered out of it. She was nowhere to be seen.

But Watkins came forward.

"Madam is resting, sir," he said, "until dinner."

"I'll go to her, then," Major Crespin ordered.

Watkins bowed, and spoke to one of the servants waiting behind him.

"He knows no Henglish, sir," Watkins said regretfully, "but he hunderstands gestures somethink surprising, and he knows a few words of the French tongue, hif you'll be so good has to pronounce 'em slow, and one at a toime."

Crespin nodded curtly, saw Traherne leaving his chair, hesitated an instant, and then motioned the man of a little French to show him the way. He'd find Lu, or he'd pull the bally old show down, he said to himself, and he meant it. No sense in making a fuss, or a mess, till he had to, till the right time came; but when it did he'd make the damnedest mess the Eastern hemisphere'd seen yet. So, he threw Traherne a nod, and followed the white-clad native.

Dr. Traherne searched the great entrance hall, looking for Mrs. Crespin beyond her husband. She was not in sight, nor was the Raja. Well, probably Antony Crespin knew where his wife was, had spoken to and was following her—the hall wound just beyond the stairs. He hoped it was so, intensely. And he checked an impulse to call Crespin back to question him. Apparently nothing was wrong yet—not openly wrong—or Crespin would not be trudging along so contentedly beside that squat image in the white silk, red-edged gown. There was nothing to gain and everything to risk in kicking up an impotent dust before one had to; above all, to show fear was the worst

move one could possibly make when one played chess for heads with an Oriental. Odd the Raja was not here! Leading the way just ahead with Mrs. Crespin probably. That was right enough, with Crespin right behind them. So he moved on after the Major.

But Watkins stayed him.

"This way, hif you please, sir," the valet said subserviently, indicating a quite different turn in the vast hall. "The ladies are that side of the 'ouse, sir, hand the military gentleman, because of his lidy, but your rooms are hover 'ere, sir, and this man will hattend you."

Traherne nodded a little curtly but, as the others already had done, did as he was told. Best carry on, he reflected, none too reassured, and carry on warily and quietly.

They all separately had come to the same forced, uncomfortable conclusion.

Alone, lost in this no-white-man's land, the three English just carried on. It seemed all they could do.

CHAPTER XXI

THE rooms to which Mrs. Crespin and the two Englishmen had been conducted were in as perfect taste as they were luxurious and were all comfortable, hers even more all this than theirs, but all admirable and irreproachable.

But the room to which they were taken, to await the Raja's pleasure and his dinner, left a good deal to be desired, displayed a good deal to regret. In no way as bad as the usual State Apartments of a native palace, it smacked of them in much. The room itself, and the costliness of the deckings, would have discredited no princely house in Europe or New York; a spacious and beautifully proportioned room, opening wide at the back upon a wide loggia. Beyond the loggia rose the snow-clad peaks of the distant mountains, rose-dappled now by the kiss of the late afternoon sun, and with strips and spaces of blue and soft purple sky between them.

The room itself was splendidly though clashingly and somewhat sparsely furnished. Most of its furnishings old-fashioned now—no "new-art" here—and some of it faded, but all the sightlier for that, because colors and materials, insistently pronounced when new, time and wear had softened and mellowed to a friendly, gracious exquisiteness that was welcome and restful and kind. But the usual clocks were there, a dozen or more, all of them ugly, several of them tawdry. Most of the actual furniture was black, but for that it was admirable, rich, not heavy, the black wood picked out

delicately with gold, the upholstery covered with yellow brocades. But the yellow damasks and the gold tracing did not clash, for they had grown old and amiable together, and time had blended them. The crystal chandelier was there, to be sure, but only one, and a crystal chandelier with a difference. Its lines were graceful, its long pendants winked and sparkled pleasantly; and it flooded the great room without dominating it—a great, gorgeous, costly thing, but you could forget it. It was not insistent—imperial without being impertinent; old, dignified, in no way "new rich," and no more garish than soft, changeable silk is. A rounded ottoman—an inviting resting-place heaped with soft cushions, neither buried nor crushed beneath them—stood under the chandelier, placed there too mathematically. The marble fireplace would have rejoiced an Athenian sculptor, or Robert Adam when he carved and cut old London's Adelphi into forms and lines of beauty; and the mirror above it would have intrigued Marie Antoinette or the beauties of Watteau.

In this room of his the Raja of Rukh, if he himself had selected and directed its appointments, had mingled things from many lands and of many times, but they did not blend, and not many of them suited the room itself. Two crystal candlesticks on the fireplace mantle, echoed with their pendants the iridescent note of the large chandelier, and between them, the mantle's only other ornament, stood exquisitely molded in bronze, eighteen inches perhaps in height, but a small thing in the room's big space, a seemingly tiny reproduction of the six-armed goddess in the temple.

The fireplace was ready piled with logs, but they were not lit. Electric lights neither artistically nor cunningly fashioned were placed conveniently here and there. A

gramophone, as ugly as that modern disfigurement usually is, stood obtrusively at one end of the room; French and English books and reviews lay on several tables. There were roses in bowls, and tulips in vases. There was scent of sandal-wood and of lemon-verbena in the air, a smell of musk on the cushions. The pictures on the wall were bad—but they had their right here, portraits of handsome, gorgeously dressed Orientals—bad painting, if not bad drawing, as Western canons go, flat-faced and over-detailed as the craftsmanship of the Persian artists when Persia held pride of place in the Asian art world; but the pictures, not crowded, were not too many, and their carved camphor-wood frames were very beautiful. And they spoke—they told a story; and despicable as was their brush-work, nil their perspective, overdone and finicking their detail, peccable their drawing, they had character—it was patrician. And similar as they all were, each had its own clear individuality as differentiated as the tissues and gems of their turbans. And wherever you went the eyes of those pictured princes followed you, or rather drew your own eyes back to the inscrutable painted lid-narrowed, dark eyes of those who had ruled here before Rome had a Cæsar.

Traherne, coming in, looked at the room without much seeing it, for his eyes were anxiously searching for the Crespins.

They were not there. No one was there. And again he marked time and waited, for the very solid reason that no other course recommended itself to him as wiser. He moved idly, but watchfully to the open side of the room—even to look out over an open landscape might ease a trifle his sense of imprisonment; but he stopped at the room edge of the loggia,

because he saw that three natives were there. He had no desire for Rukh society, peasant or noble.

Two turbaned servants were there laying a table, a dignified old major-domo directing them importantly. Traherne saw that they were laying four covers, and that the table appointments were extremely luxurious and entirely European. He turned at the slight sound of a door opened quickly.

Crespin came in and looked about him apprehensively, and the servant who had ushered him in, salaamed and went back closing the door behind him.

"Ah," Crespin said with a tone of "thank goodness" in his voice, "there you are, Doctor!"

"Hullo!" Traherne returned. He noticed how flushed the other looked, and for all his flush how haggard. "How did you get on?"

"All right. Had a capital tub. And you?"

"Feeling more like a human being," the doctor admitted. "And what about Mrs. Crespin? I hope she's all right?"

"She was taken off by an ayah as soon as we got in—" Crespin said lamely—"in the women's quarters presumably." He did not find it necessary to add that it was but hearsay information he passed on, and that he had seen no more of his wife than Traherne himself had since she had preceded them from the temple in her palanquin—and he did not meet the other man's glance, but shifted his eyes about the strange room uneasily.

Basil Traherne's face whitened, and his strong hands clenched angrily. "And you let her go off alone?" he demanded violently.

"What the hell could I do?" Crespin retorted, more

resentfully than he felt. "I couldn't thrust myself into the women's quarters."

Traherne swung towards him with a smothered oath. "And I tell you you ought to have thrust yourself in anywhere—heaven or hell! And you should have kept her with you! You could have kept her with you," Traherne cried passionately.

"Do you think she would have stayed?" Crespin demanded nastily. "And, come to that, what business is it of yours?"

"It's any *man's* business to be concerned for a woman's safety," Traherne pounded back.

"Well, well—all right," Crespin muttered weakly. He had come into the room "considerably bucked," but the courage he'd found in a drink or two after his tub, was evaporating fast, and he wished, 'pon his soul he did, that Traherne wouldn't rave so. "Well, well. But there was nothing I could have done, or that she would have let me do. And I don't think there's any danger."

Traherne's mouth twitched with the disgust he felt. And this was her husband! "Let us hope not," he said coldly.

Crespin ignored the sneer in the other's voice. He preferred to—he felt in no shape for a scrap just now, and there might be scrap enough of another and deadlier sort to face soon—and that would have to be faced no matter in what shape he felt. He sat down heavily in a big chair by the fireplace. "It's a vast shanty, this," he said fumblingly, looking about him vaguely.

"It's a palace and fortress in one," Traherne replied, but in no friendly tone.

Crespin did not wish to talk, but he clung to the

change of subject desperately, and said, "A devilish strong place before the days of big guns. But a couple of howitzers would make it look pretty foolish."

"No doubt; but how would you get them here?" snapped Traherne.

That was unanswerable, and Crespin made no attempt to answer it.

"I wish to God we had them here though!" the physician added passionately, not looking at the man he spoke to, but with tortured eyes hard on the door, his ears strained to catch a woman's step in the hall.

"I wish we had," Major Crespin assented dejectedly. He pulled himself out of the armchair, levering himself up by its arms, and moved to the loggia. "My hat!" he exclaimed, and whistled in surprise and approval as the dinner table met his gaze. "I say—it looks as if our friend were going to do us well."

A servant came in with a large wine-cooler and put it down. Traherne paid him no attention, but Crespin watched him narrowly, and as soon as the native had gone as he'd come, and closed the door behind him, Crespin pulled a bottle up from the ice, and inspected its label. He whistled again, and his bloodshot eyes glistened. "Perrier Jouet, nineteen-o-six, by the Lord!" He ran an affectionate tremulous fat finger over the already beading gold-foiled neck of the bottle thirstily. Even poor Crespin's fingers were thirsty. He was one big thirst, and the sight of the vintage wine almost maddened him. He rammed it back into its ice pack, and strolled over to the ottoman, and sank into its cushions. "It's a rum start this, Traherne," he murmured. "I suppose you intellectual chaps would call it romantic."

Traherne took his eyes from the door for a moment.

"More romantic than agreeable, I should say," he muttered, as he picked the small goddess up from the mantle. "I don't like the looks of this lady," he added as he put it down.

"What is she?" Crespin asked sleepily.

"The same figure we saw in the little temple, where we landed," Traherne told him.

Both were talking to lift a little, if they could, the strain of the tension that both were feeling, and of the bitterness that surged in each against the other.

"How many arms has she got?" Crespin demanded, regarding her lazily.

"Six."

"She could give you a jolly good hug, anyway," Crespin said with a mirthless and slightly tipsy laugh.

Traherne shot him a sharp look. "You wouldn't want another," he said darkly, and turned away to watch the door.

For a time there was silence. Neither man spoke or moved and from the outer stillness no stir of life came. Traherne's face grew like a death mask, sweat gathered on Crespin's forehead, and specked his red face.

A jackal called.

Some deeper-throated thing answered or challenged it out on the mountains.

"Where do you suppose we really are, Traherne?" Crespin asked unsteadily.

"On the map, you mean?"

"Of course."

"Oh, in the never-never land," Traherne answered without moving his eyes from the door. "Somewhere on the way to Bokhara. I've been searching my memory for all I ever heard about Rukh. I fancy very little

is known, except that it seems to send forth a peculiarly poisonous breed of fanatics."

"Like those who did poor Haredale in?" Crespin asked, referring to the crime for which the newspapers had reported the perpetrators were to be hanged.

"Precisely."

"D'you think," Crespin asked, shifting unhappily on his seat, "our host was serious when he said they were his brothers? Or was he only pulling our leg, curse his impudence?"

"He probably meant caste-brothers, or simply men of his race," the doctor surmised. "But even so, it's awkward."

"I don't see what these beggars, living at the back of the north wind, have got to do with Indian politics," Crespin grumbled. "We've never interfered with them."

"Oh, it's a case of Asia for the Asians," the other solved it. "Ever since the Japanese beat the Russians, the whole continent has been itching to kick us out."

"So that they may cut each other's throats at leisure, eh?" Crespin asked almost quarrelsomely.

Traherne answered no less so. Any pretext or none would have served them for dire quarrel now—only a woman's peril held them in leash. "We Westerners never cut each other's throats, do we?" he snarled.

But still he watched the door.

Crespin began a retort, but cut it short, as he saw that the English valet was in the room, and Traherne turning expectantly at the sound saw Watkins too, and though disappointed was glad. Both the gentlemen were glad to see the serving man. Any interruption was welcome, any human third a real relief.

CHAPTER XXII

THE man had come in noiselessly, carrying a centerpiece for the dinner table, a silver elephant very beautiful in its workmanship, the howdah filled with fresh flowers—delicate filmy orchids, radiant and deep carnations and odorous violets. He put it down and turned to go, as he had come, but it was then that Crespin had seen, and Traherne had heard.

"Hullo!" Crespin hailed him. "Hullo! What's your name? Just come here a minute, will you?"

"Meaning me, sir?" Watkins advanced a few steps, with a touch of covert insolence in manner and voice, his nervousness of an hour ago seemingly gone.

"Yes, you, Mr.—? Mr.—?" Crespin said, involuntarily speaking in his turn with a touch of contempt.

"Watkins is my name, sir," the man told him.

"Right-o, Watkins." Far wiser to be as hail-fellow as one could contrivably stomach with a fellow so near the person and the ear of the autocrat upon whom one's fate actually depended. And after all this chap was English—the letter H was his hall-mark for that—not much English, but English, the only being of their own island-race within impassable miles of them probably. That counted for something! It always does in the wilds. "Can you tell us where we are, Watkins?"

"They calls the place Rukh, sir."

Traherne, listening and watching, knew that the man was not to be drawn.

But Crespin persisted, "Yes, yes, we know that. But where is Rukh?"

"I understand these mountains is called the 'Imalayas, sir," Watkins replied in a tone that said clearly that he merely passed on a rumor he'd heard, and in no way vouched for it.

"Damn it, sir, we don't want a lesson in geography!" the Major snapped.

"No, sir?" Watkins seemed surprised, then added apologetically, "My mistake, sir," but the insolence still lurked in the voice and manner.

"Major Crespin means that we want to know," Traherne intervened, "how far we are from the nearest point in India."

"I really couldn't say, sir." Well, Traherne had not expected that he would. "Not so very far, I dessay, as the crow flies."

"Unfortunately we're not in a position to fly with the crow," Traherne retorted. "How long does the journey take?" He had no idea that Watkins knowingly would admit anything useful, but there was always the chance that the better and finer trained intelligence might trap the boorish and feebler.

"They tell me it takes about three weeks to Cashmere," the valet said indifferently.

"They tell you!" Crespin almost snarled. "Surely you must remember how long it took you?"

"No, sir," Watkins spoke meekly now, but something far from meekness lurked in his shifty eyes. "Excuse me, sir—I've never been in India."

"Not been in India?" Crespin was openly incredulous. And he added, "I was just thinking, as I looked at you, that I seemed to have seen you before."

"Not in India," Watkins said quickly — too quickly, Dr. Traherne thought. "We might 'ave met

in England, but I don't call to mind having that pleasure."

Crespin was too angry at that impertinence to allow himself to notice it, and only said, "But, if you haven't been in India, how the hell did you get here?"

"I came with 'Is 'Ighness, sir, by way of Tashkent," Watkins explained glibly—but Traherne thought that he said it anxiously too. "All our dealings with Europe is by way of Russia."

"I daresay," Crespin grunted, not too wisely.

"But it's possible to get to India direct," Traherne broke in, "and not by way of central Asia?"

"Oh, yes, it's done, sir," Watkins admitted; "but I'm told there are some very tight places to negotiate—like the camel and the needle's eye, as you might say."

"Difficult traveling for a lady, eh?" Traherne asked it, knowing the answer, but he wished to keep the man talking, on the chance of even one useful word that might be let slip; and he thought the prompting safer in his hands than in Crespin's.

"Next door to himpossible, I should guess, sir," the man said promptly.

Crespin groaned. "A nice lookout, Traherne!" Then he turned to Watkins, with, "Tell me, my man—is His Highness—h'm—married?"

Watkins permitted himself a respectful smile. "Oh, yessir—very much so, sir."

"Children?"

"He has fifteen sons, sir."

"The daughters don't count, eh?" Crespin demanded.

"I've never 'ad a hopportunity of counting 'em, sir," Watkins said as if gently correcting a not too excusable ignorance.

"He said," Traherne slipped in, "the men accused of assassinating a political officer were his brothers—"

"Did 'e say that, sir?" the man asked quickly—evidently he was startled out of his well-trained impersonality. Clearly Watkins was excited.

"Didn't you hear him? What did he mean?" Traherne said it carefully, not as if too much interested, watching Watkins narrowly though, and pressing swiftly into the possible opening.

But Watkins had remembered himself. "I'm sure I couldn't say, sir," he said colorlessly, permitting himself the slightest shrug. "'Is 'Ighness is what you'd call a very playful gentleman, sir."

"But," Traherne insisted, "I don't see the joke in saying that."

"No, sir?" the servant replied respectfully. "'P'raps 'Is 'Ighness'll explain, sir," he added significantly.

Dr. Traherne accepted the hint, and turned away his eyes and attention, giving them both again to the door.

There was a pause—the English "sahibs" busy each with his own thoughts, the English servant still, and patiently waiting, apparently interested in nothing on earth, and, if occupied or busy, entirely so with his own vacuity. As a matter of fact, Watkins gladly would have beat a soft-footed retreat, but he had had his orders, and he would obey them. For Watkins, as he had more than hinted in the courtyard of the Green Goddess' temple, knew who buttered his bread, and knew acutely how sharp and sure the knife was by means of which that butter was spread.

Crespin broke the pause. Something the Raja of Rukh had said, down there by the temple, scarcely had struck him at the moment, but he had remembered it persistently, and the more he'd thought of it the more

it had rankled, and he had been chewing it over in an impotent way ever since. He went at it now, "Your master spoke of visits from European ladies—do they come from Russia?" he questioned.

"From various parts, I understand, sir," the man replied discreetly, but added tonelessly, "Mostly from Paris," but an eye twitched slightly, as if it might under easier circumstances have winked not unlasciviously.

"Any here now?" Crespin asked roughly—and there was a rough lump in his throat—and Traherne knotted his hands, and went a stride nearer the door.

"I really couldn't say, sir," was all Watkins would own.

"They don't dine with His Highness?" Traherne asked crisply.

"Oh, no, sir," the valet assured him, adding, "'Is 'Ighness sometimes sups with them."

"And my wife—Mrs. Crespin—?" Crespin began miserably—asking it because he was tortured indeed, and after all this bounder was British too.

"Make your mind easy, sir," Watkins told him staunchly, speaking with a genuine something of kindness and more respectfully than he had before—perhaps because after all he *was*, or at least had been, British—"the lady won't meet any hundesirable characters, sir. I give," he added a touch pompously, "strict orders to the—female what took charge of the lady."

"She is to be trusted?" Traherne swung round as he spoke.

"Habsolutely, sir," the man said proudly, with a bow. "She is—in a manner of speakin'—my wife, sir."

"Mrs. Watkins, eh?" Crespin exclaimed, a little amused in spite of his growing anxiety. Thomas At-

kins never did that. But apparently Watkins had. "Mrs. Watkins!"

"Yessir," Watkins admitted, "I suppose you would say so."

Traherne was neither amused by them nor interested in Watkins' matrimonial ventures—church-blessed or nominal—and he had no idea whether the fellow was telling the truth or not. But he spoke to him again, "But now look here, Watkins," he began, "you say we're three weeks away from Cashmere—yet the Raja knew of the sentence passed on these subjects of his, who were tried only three days ago. How do you account for that?"

"I can't, sir," the man said stolidly. "All I can say is, there's queer things goes on here."

"Queer things?" Traherne asked quickly—he was drawing the sleek valet at last!—"What do you mean?"

"Well, sir," came the slow, provoking answer, "them priests you know—they goes in a lot for what 'Is 'Ighness calls magic—"

"Oh, come, Watkins—you don't believe in that!" Dr. Traherne jibed impatiently, with an oath just behind his lips.

"Well, sir, p'raps not," the English valet said slyly. "I don't, not to say believe in it. But there's queer things goes on. I can't say no more, nor I can't say no less. If you'll excuse me, sir, I must just run my eye over the dinner table. 'Is 'Ighness will be here directly."

Clearly there was no more to be pulled out of Watkins. And they waited in moody silence, while he touched the table arrangements here and there, and then noiselessly left the room.

Then, "That fellow's either a cunning rascal or a

damned fool," Crespin muttered. "Which do you think?"

"I don't believe he's the fool he'd like us to take him for." Then as if some endurance had snapped, Traherne flung towards the door.

"I say," Crespin halted him, "where are you going?"

"I'm going to find her!" Traherne said roughly.

Crespin rose to his feet. "Sit down!" he ordered. "That's up to me—if I think it either necessary or wise; which I don't! It's not up to you!"

"It's up to a *man!*" Basil Traherne said hotly, with a level look in Crespin's eyes.

"Come back!" Antony Crespin commanded. "You—"

A moment more and they would have grappled it out there, grappling each other's throats.

But the door opened softly, and the woman they loved came into the room.

CHAPTER XXIII

SWOLLEN and quivered with anger as they were, they both were startled at her beauty. Always rather more than good-looking, Lucilla Crespin had never looked like this before.

"Ah," Traherne said, pulling himself together with an almost heroic effort, "here is Mrs. Crespin!"

The ayah—if that was her household rank—who had brought Lucilla into the room went quietly out, closing the door. And the three captives—the men at least knew it for that—stood alone in the vast, clamorous room.

Whatever fear was curdling the bloods of the men, the Englishwoman who shared their danger, and stood in a graver one of her own, seemed unperturbed and carefree. Certainly she was radiant, and superbly lovely as she stood there, the breathing, beautiful jewel to which the palace room, rich as it was, seemed but a humble setting, and the ermined mountain peaks and blue velvet sky beyond the wide loggia but background—background and subsidiary, though she faced it.

Crespin's eyes filled, and Basil Traherne caught his breath painfully. They had seen her in the saddle, they knew how well she rode, and how it became her. They had seen her in the soft white gowns that such women wear in India. They had seen her dainty and exquisitely dressed—a wild-rose pink flush on her cheeks—at dozens of dances, in garden-party finery, in Government House splendor, in neat, simple linens cuddling

her babies, in bib and apron mixing English cakes and scones for her Punjabi tea-table, they had seen her in tea-gowns and tweeds, seen her with her delicate patrician English face softened by the furs beneath it, and had seen her with the gems on throat and breast resparkling in her eyes—and the throat that each thought her utmost loveliness (and that women who disliked her called her one beauty) gleam like snow under the jewels that circled it, and needing them not, and Antony Crespin had seen her in the soft déshabillé that enhanced her most. But neither ever had seen her look as she looked now. Some lure of the East, some soul of the East, had transformed the girl of a Surrey garden into an Eastern queen—though perhaps she never before had looked, or felt, so intensely English.

If either husband or friend saw or sensed this dual quality gleaming in her as she stood there, as its colors gleam through an opal, neither was conscious that he did so. But her beauty hit and quivered them. The wild-rose tints were gone from her face; her pallor was radiant. Her hair, always beautiful—and Crespin knew how soft and long, and how uncontrived its rippling—was more elaborately dressed than was her custom, some experter hands than hers had tired it—for Mrs. Crespin, like many Englishwomen, was defter at handling bridle and reins and rackets than she was at toilet devisings and doings. Her dark filmy gown could not have been simpler or costlier; it was just cut from her throat, and its long sleeves slashed to hint more than they showed of her arms. Except for her wedding-ring and the engagement diamond beside it, her only ornament was a gold locket that she always wore fastened about her throat by a slender thread of chain. And she wore neither the rings nor the locket and chain

for ornament. Wives of such wedlock as hers had proved feel more stigma than adornment in its symbols; and the locket was infinitely more than any gewgaw—it held her babies' faces.

She appeared to have thrown off or have lost her moiety of the fear they three had shared. Her eyes sparkled, and her lips curved in a smile. Whatever else she had felt, Mrs. Crespin was enjoying sincerely her adventure now.

She stood and smiled at them. And the eyes and hearts of two men leapt to her—and she seemed to them both the core of all desire, and each—the two of such different instincts and tastes—thought her perfect, a human flower needing no added perfume, no other beauty of texture, tint or outline. A man loving a woman with all the tenderness and strength of his best manhood may see and know her faults and flaws, and love her for them none the less. But the man who desires sees no imperfections, sight and mind are as fevered and irresponsible as his aching blood is. The husband who had lost her, and the man who loved her as reverently as passionately, and, so, without hope or thought, and even without wish—except as our flesh and nerves wish in spite of us—that he ever might seek or claim or hold her—both desired her as she stood there in the sumptuous simplicity of the soft thing she wore, and beautiful and desirable as she never had seemed before. Traherne forgot where they were—for a moment—forgot the danger that menaced them; but he did not forget his best self or hers, and he did not forget a boy he had fagged for at Harrow, or the sore young tragedy that had been that schoolmate's to bear, and his own to witness. And no treacherous thing lurked in his heart, no dishonorable thing showed

in his eyes. Crespin too forgot where they were and what their plight, but he forgot nothing else—he remembered his wooing of her, his possession of her, and how he had lost her.

And Lucilla Crespin looked from one to the other, and smiled. She did not see how white their faces were; she had not caught their quarreling as she came in, for the sinking sun shone hard in her eyes, and their backs were to it.

"Ah, here is Mrs. Crespin!" Traherne said with an effort.

She took a few steps towards them, holding out her draperies a little, as gleefully as a child in new festival robes. "Behold the Paris model!" she bade them.

"My eye, Lu, what a ripping frock!" was Antony's comment.

"Talk of magic, Major!" Traherne laughed, turning and speaking as if never a shadow of quarreling had hung over them. "There's something in what our friend says."

"What's that? What about magic?" Mrs. Crespin demanded, accepting the chair that Crespin moved towards her.

"We'll tell you afterwards," her husband promised. "Let's have your adventures first." He spoke lightly, but he was anxious.

"No adventures precisely—only a little excursion into the Arabian Nights," she laughed.

"Do tell us!" Traherne urged.

"Well," she began, a little nervous now, Traherne thought, but evidently not without enjoyment of the experience, "my guide—the woman you saw—led me along corridor after corridor, and upstairs and downstairs, till we came to a heavy bronze door where two

villainous looking blacks, with crooked swords, were on guard. I didn't like the looks of them a bit; but I was in for it, and had to go on. They drew their swords and flourished a sort of salute, grinning with all their teeth. Then the ayah clapped her hands twice, some one inspected us through a grating in the door, and the ayah said a word or two—"

"No doubt, 'Open Sesame!'" Traherne suggested.

Mrs. Crespin nodded. "The door was opened by a hideous, hump-backed old woman, just like the wicked fairy in a pantomime. She didn't actually bite me, but she looked as if she'd like to—and we passed on. More corridors, with curtained doorways, where I had a feeling that furtive eyes were watching me—though I can't positively say I saw them. But I'm sure I heard whisperings and titterings—"

"Good Lord!" Crespin broke in. "If I'd thought they were going to treat you like that, I'd have—"

"Oh," his wife retorted, "there was nothing you could have done; and, you see, no harm came of it. At last the woman led me into a large sort of wardrobe room, lighted from above, and almost entirely lined with glazed presses full of frocks. Then she slid back a panel, and there was a marble-lined bathroom!—a deep pool, with a trickle of water flowing into it from a dolphin's head of gold—just enough to make the surface ripple and dance. And all around were the latest Bond Street luxuries—shampooing bowls and brushes, bottles of essences, towels on hot rails and all the rest of it. The only thing that was disagreeable was a sickly odor from some burning pastilles—oh, and a coal-black bath-woman."

"It suggests a Royal Academy picture," Traherne observed. "'The Odalisque's Pool.'"

"Or a soap advertisement," Crespin objected.

"Same thing," Traherne said lazily.

"Well, I wasn't sorry to play the odalisque for once," Lucilla assured them, "and when I had finished, lo and behold! the ayah had laid out for me half-a-dozen gorgeous and distinctly risky dinner-gowns." Traherne gnawed suddenly at his lip, Crespin frowned angrily, but neither spoke or moved, and Lucilla, not catching their common thought, went on, "I had to explain to her in gestures that I couldn't live up to any of them, and would rather put on my old traveling dress. She seemed quite frightened at the idea—"

"She'd probably have got the sack—perhaps literally—if she'd let you do that," Crespin said slowly, and a hard, fierce look came into the other man's eyes.

But Lucilla still seemed unconscious of their thought, and continued quite cheerfully—Rukh a little in her blood now, Traherne thought—"Anyway, she at last produced this comparatively inoffensive frock. She did my hair—fancy her being able to do it like this!—and wanted to finish me off with all sorts of necklaces and bangles, but I stuck to my old locket with the babies' heads."

"Well," her husband said discontentedly, "all's well that ends well, I suppose. But if I'd foreseen all this 'Secrets of the Zenana' business, I'm dashed if I wouldn't—"

Lucilla cut him short. "What were you saying about magic when I came in?"

"Only that this man, Watkins—he's the husband of your ayah, by the way—says queer things go on here, and pretends to believe in magic."

"Do you know, Antony"—Mrs. Crespin turned to her husband—"when the Raja was speaking about him

—this man Watkins—down there, it seemed to me that his face was somehow familiar to me."

Crespin sat bolt upright, and his tired face lit with interest. "There, Doctor!" he exclaimed. "What did I say? I knew I'd seen him before, but I'm damned if I can place him."

"I wish I could get a good look at him," Lucilla said thoughtfully. And as she spoke Watkins passed through the room again, carrying four blossoms which he took to the dinner table and laid on the folded serviettes; and Traherne saw him.

"That's easy," he told her. "There he is. Shall I call him in?"

Mrs. Crespin nodded eagerly. "Do! Say I want him to thank his wife from me."

"Watkins!" Traherne called him.

"Sir?" Watkins responded instantly, but without moving from the table.

"Mrs. Crespin would like to speak to you." And at that the man came at once, and stood waiting, inwardly curious, outwardly respectful.

"I hear, Watkins," Mrs. Crespin told him, looking him well in the face—and wishing the light were not at his back, "that the ayah that so kindly attended to me is your wife."

"That's right, ma'am," Watkins said staunchly enough. Crespin wondered lazily if the cockney was fond—or even proud—of his native wife. Such things always interested Antony Crespin rather.

"She gave me most efficient assistance," Mrs. Crespin said, speaking very deliberately, that she might study his face the longer, "and as she seems to know no English, I couldn't thank her. Will you be good enough to tell her how much I appreciated all she did for me?"

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," the valet said as if he meant it. "She'll be proud to hear it." And the man looked genuinely pleased. He was genuinely pleased; for the shifty little cockney was fond of his big dark wife, and proud of her too, as small men often are of wives that o'ertop them. And it was, as it chanced, the one good human spot in Samuel Watkins' thin, brutal heart. "Is that all, ma'am?" he asked after a pause—for she still was looking at him as if she might have more to say.

But she could think of nothing else, and she believed that she had gained her point, so she nodded pleasantly, and dismissed him with a pleasant, "That's all, thank you, Watkins."

The man bowed, and went back to the loggia, but he passed now to the outer side of the dinner table, where, seeming to be studying it still, he stood watching them warily. They involuntarily drew closer together, but Traherne, seeming to be watching idly the kindling mountains and sky, was watching Watkins as narrowly as Watkins watched them.

"You've a good memory for faces, Lu," the Major said to his wife. "Do you spot him?"

"Don't let him see we're talking about him," she cautioned. "I believe I do know him, but I'm not quite sure. Do you remember," she said slowly, "the first year we were in India, there was a man in the Dorsets that used often to be on guard outside the mess-room?"

Antony Crespin sprang to his feet. "By God," he cried, "you've hit it!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THEY all three were excited—even Traherne, though he scarcely showed it—and they drew closer together eagerly. What importance Mrs. Crespin's discovery, if she was right, could be to them, or why it excited them, not one of them could have said; but in such threatening of shipwreck as theirs agitated human minds see in every straw a possible life-boat, and catch at it anxiously. They clustered together excitedly, Lucilla Crespin still in her seat, the two men standing close before her. Traherne's face alert, the woman's eyes sparkling, and Antony Crespin raised his voice exultantly. "By God, you've hit it, Lu!" he repeated.

"Take care!" Traherne cautioned him quickly, not looking at Major Crespin, but at the man out on the loggia. "He's watching."

Dr. Traherne was right; Watkins was watching stealthily, and too was straining his utmost to listen.

"You remember," Mrs. Crespin almost whispered, "he deserted, Antony, and was suspected of having murdered a woman in the bazaar."

"I believe it's the very man," Crespin muttered eagerly.

"It's certainly very like him," his wife insisted.

"And he swears he's never been in India!" Crespin said with a nasty laugh.

"Under the circumstances," Dr. Traherne said dryly, "he naturally would. I should."

"At all events he's not a man to be trusted," Mrs. Crespin added regretfully.

"Trusted!" Crespin retorted impatiently, "who thought of trusting him? Who'd be such a fool? He with that damned Uriah Heep face of his, and a British man, if of the true cockney brand, an Englishman acting as a body servant to a native! Who'd *think* of trusting him!"

For all that same they all were disappointed, and they all knew it. Any port in a storm! And, if misery has to put up with strange bed-fellows, it very often seeks them. The valet was English, their countryman, and for that the thought of each of them had fastened upon him as a possible aid or means of escape. And Lucilla Crespin was honest enough to say so.

"I had for one," she said frankly. "I liked his wife. He comes from home! It must mean something to him that we are his country-people. But now, of course —if I'm right, and I think I am—and especially if he thinks we've recognized him—he'd know you, Antony, of course."

"Don't you believe it, Lu, country and all that means nothing to such fellows," Major Crespin interrupted. And Traherne shook his head.

"No, Mrs. Crespin, he won't help us, whether he's the fellow you think he is or not. I know his breed. I know the shape of his head. We must find another way out—that is, if we need one—which I hope we shan't."

"But you think we shall?"

"Yes," he answered her gravely. "I think we shall."

The Raja of Rukh was dressing for dinner. There was no tire-man with him, and he moved about his dressing-room as if very much in the habit of waiting

upon himself—perhaps an old varsity habit that clung to him still here in his palace-fortress on his native hills. For he had kept no valet at Cambridge. A turban newly wound he wore on his head, but his low-cut pumps, his well-creased trousers, were quite European, and so were the silk braces that held them up to the waist line of his immaculate shirt. His waistcoat and dinner jacket still lay on a chair, but his studs were in, his collar was on, and his white tie was beautifully done—if he had tied it himself, his evening tie did him great credit. And he had. The Raja of Rukh was deft-fingered—he could dress himself from skin to button-hole rose without worry or accident; and he usually did—no fumbling, no searching for studs, no swear words, no beading of sweat, no butter fingers, neither a crease nor a care. Watkins looked the perfect valet, but Rukh himself had trained him for the part, and there was less of valet than of varlet in Watkins' office, and very much more of deeper doing.

The Raja stood a long time at the low wide window, and looked out over Rukh. It was his, all that he saw was his. Not a wee white hill-mouse, not a jeweled-and-lacquered beetle, not a leaf, not a tiniest grain but was his. The people were his—the patient, plodding, excitable people. The cattle were his, sure-footed, mountain things that carried the water his people drew, that carried the wood his people hewed. The caravans that came and went on the long, periled mountain roads, now in snow and ice, now in pelting heat and thick flowered and perfumed underbush, a camel among them sometimes, but almost entirely tiny, sturdy, sagacious ponies, and sweat-dripping human beasts of burden, bringing him and his miniature but costly court every conceivable thing from marts distant and near—glass

from Venice, enamels from Japan, lacquers from China, leathers from Russia, wines from France and Portugal, fabrics from everywhere, necessities and luxuries, tinned asparagus and turtle soup, linens from Belfast, flesh-pots for him, cotton cloths and grains for his people—all were his. And he loved it as a woman loves her young—a ruthless, iron-willed man, his heart was mother-soft to his peasant people. The little huts hanging there on the mountain edges, with the smoke from the dung fires curling out—telling that the evening meal of thin, flat cakes was cooking—were dearer to him than was this great, palace home of his own. He was very rich. The place looked poor enough (all but his own fortress coign) and the people were, but the hard, rocky place belched up daily wealth for his hidden coffers. Almost numberless coins of silver and of gold, sodden and grimed with the dust of ages, were buried beneath the palace, in a rock-cut fastness to which only he and one of his henchmen knew the way, or held the key, and the bale-and-sack-bent hillmen and the sure-footed creatures who toiled back and forth from Rukh to Bokhara and Kabul by night as by day, taking his products, bringing the price of them, never ceased. His spending was prodigal, but his income alone more than sufficed for it. And his buried treasure grew.

A woman came unceremoniously in, and he turned to her instantly, and stood and waited her pleasure. The woman was old, poorly though comfortably clad. There were many rings on her bare feet's toes, but the rings were of little value, circlets of brass and of silver coarsely jeweled with uncut gems of the commoner pebble-like sorts, none of them "precious," and all of them but fragments—and she wore no other ornament.

Her wrinkled skin was exactly the color of the saffron stuff that formed her only visible garment, and the wrinkled saffron skin was as coarse as the saffron woolen stuff. Her white hair was uncovered, her strong eyebrows streaked her yellow brow like twin patches of persistent snow on some rough brown ledge of mountain rock; palpably a peasant woman, hill-born, hill-bred, untutored—though her hands, mottled and soft with age, looked to have done no work—and the Raja of Rukh smiled at her tenderly, and waited her pleasure, as meekly as a timid child who feared and anticipated punishment or, at the best, bitter scolding from an exigeant and petulant mother. And it was just that that he did expect and very much dreaded. She usually came here to berate him, and she never failed to do it, if she found him in European garments, or had heard that European guests were being harbored and entertained.

The Raja ruled Rukh—all there obeyed him abjectly—all but Ak-kok, the old peasant woman. She obeyed no one, and feared no one or thing, not even the Green Goddess, not the sacred serpents, not the man-eating beasts that prowled from the mountains and wilds to maul and devour. She obeyed no one, she feared nothing, and though she worshiped him fiercely, she bullied the Raja of Rukh in season and out. And he loved her and feared her, salaamed to her too, and called her "Mother," caressed her when she would brook it—for she had suckled him, and the babe she had left to other care when she had come to the palace to do it had sickened and died. She had not seemed to care then, forbidding her heart to quicken or falter a single beat, forbidding her heart to feel or to know, lest it curdle her milk. And the babe had been her only one, and

its father was newly dead. But when the baby prince was weaned, she had let her pent-up, drugged grief have its way. She had covered her face in her robe, and gone from the palace, wailing and beating her breasts—still sore from a festered teething-grip, sorer still for the babe lips that had been denied their milk—had gone to the place on the hillside where the burning-place stood, and had joined the mourners squatted about a reeking pile—a child's as it chanced—and when the little skull had cracked open with that sound like which there is no other, and the mourners had sobbed and cried, Ak-kok had laughed, rent the air with her laughing, had torn her garments and strewn the pile with them, had danced, shrieking with laughter, had torn at her face and breasts till her blood ran, and then—for none dared stay her—had turned and tottered away, still lashing the day with her laughing. It was winter—and two nights and a day had passed before they found her, out in a desolate, desert place up on the mountains, nearly naked, raving and babbling.

We punish our insane; Orientals succor and tend them.

Tenderly they carried mad Ak-kok back to the palace, gently they laid her down, never they left her, never they chided or thwarted or vexed her. And—a year and more after—her wits (as we perhaps witlessly call our human sense of human ills) came back. And such work as she chose to do she did, such things as she bade were done. She chose to sew with the girls who embroidered and beaded. Never she spoke to a child, rarely she looked at one, except the prince whom she had suckled. Little by little her love crept back to him, and then her needles and silks and baskets of sorted beads, of tinsel threads, trays of seed-pearls and of

beetles' gold-and-emerald backs had filled less and less of her time, the royal boy more and more. And when he had wived she had disliked all his brides, but had established herself nurse-in-chief to the babies they had borne.

They were twenty-five now, the offspring of the Raja, the nurslings of Ak-kok. Not one had died. La-swak, a boy of two now, was the father's favorite, and old Ak-kok loved La-swak more than she had loved aught else or all else before, even tenfold, more than the Raja and father did.

The Raja waited.

Ak-kok spoke his name hoarsely—no prefix, no gesture of respect, not even one of berating—just his name flung passionately out at him in the old woman's peasant guttural.

The Raja salaamed, and waited her tirade.

But the woman took no heed of the long broadcloth trousers he wore, no heed of the cerise silk elastic that braced them, none of coat and vest on the chair. She had not seen them. And she spoke no word of rebuke. It was fear that convulsed her, not anger. A bead of blood came from her nostril, and trickled down on to her withered lip. She did not feel it.

Twice she tried to speak again, before she did.

"La-swak!" she moaned.

The Raja sprang to her, caught at her shoulder. He could not speak, but she mastered herself, and answered him.

"The cramp again. His limbs are stiff and cold. We cannot soothe him. He cries for you." She gathered the man's hand in hers, and led him from the room.

CHAPTER XXV

HAND in hand, the Raja, coatless and waistcoat-less, the one gem in his turban flashing brilliantly in the waning afternoon light of the long, twisting corridors, his cerise braces streaking his white-shirted back, as if a broad thong had lashed it, her saffron cloth now russet-dark, now red-gold as they passed through the shadows great porphyry pillars threw, or into the light from open windows and arches. She led him, and he clung to her hand, as he had at twilight when he had done his first walking with her clasp for his stay and confidence.

It was a long, long way this that they took through the vast palace of Rukh; to him it seemed endless. At last she paused by a closed carven door. Two scimitared men on guard, drew aside and made obeisance.

Rukh caught his breath, smothering an oath. "Mother," he sobbed, "will he die?"

Ak-kok lifted her thin old arms in caress and comfort to his face, and he caught her wrists and held them there.

"Now I have brought you, he will drink perhaps the cup I have made. If he drinks, the cramp may pass, and all may be well."

The Raja motioned towards the heavy door, Ak-kok signaled one of the guards, the man ran and opened it, Rukh put up a trembling hand and lifted the curtain of broad-striped silk inside the door, and he and Ak-kok entered the room.

On a low native bed, ropes threaded across sides and ends of chased and beaten silver, a child lay moaning on a snow-leopard pelt. Charms—a tiger's eye, a cheeta's claw, a little jade god—hung in his flat embroidered cap of green silk, charms strung on a red silk cord hung about his neck, charms dangled over his acorn-shaped little belly, rich bangles clinked on his arms as he tossed them in pain, and jeweled anklets circled above each dimpled foot—and he wore nothing else. Toys strewed the silk floor-carpets, half a dozen serving women, wild-eyed and useless, cluttered the room—all but one who was kneeling down watching a saucepan that hummed on a low brazier. A girl richly robed, heavily jeweled, exquisitely beautiful, crouched on the floor weeping piteously but without a sound. She lurched a little towards Rukh as he passed her, not rising, just moving a little to lay her face on his shoe. He paid her no attention, but stumbled down by their child: La-swak, whom he loved more than he loved Rukh.

"The cramp is passing a little, my lord, I think," the girl whispered. Still he gave her neither word nor glance. And she hid her face in her hands. She had seen his European clothes, if old Ak-kok had not, and she knew that when her husband and lord wore European clothes there were European women—or, a thousand times worse—a European woman; and a cramp worse than over-fed, sugar-plum-stuffed La-swak ever had felt, or ever would, writhed and twisted his mother.

The Ranee of Rukh, and her sister wives, of whom this was the youngest, were fairly good friends. They ate their hearts out, and beat their ayahs when a white woman's shadow fell on the palace floors. And Ak-

kok went farther. She took the dance-girls for granted, saw to it often that they were fairly fed, and softly clad, but she, watching her chance, had beaten a French danseuse once till the dancer never would dance again.

Rukh flung himself down beside the child's low bed; La-swak held out his arms, and smiled, and the half-clad Raja caught him and held him close—all that he loved most in the world, and loved most purely, cuddled and cuddling tenderly there, with little brown, jeweled-cap-crowned head pressed contentedly against the stiff-starched shirt and the cerise silk braces. La-swak put up a dark dimpled hand and snatched at the brilliant braces. His moaning had ceased. Ak-kok had taken the silver pannikin from the brazier, and stood at the open window pouring the liquid it held back and forth from pannikin and cup till it was cooled to satisfy her. She brought it now, and Rukh took the cup and held it to the child's lips. La-swak shuddered a little, but he drank it all, while the father fondled and encouraged him—then gave back the cup.

"He is not very ill?" the Raja stated rather than asked.

"Not now," old Ak-kok answered. "He will do now. He soon will sleep—better he be left alone now."

One by one the others went out. The young mother went first, and the women followed her one by one. The girl mother rose reluctantly, and hesitated a moment, hoping her husband might give her a word or a glance; but he did not, and she went slowly out, hanging her head, veiling beneath their blue-veined lids the rage and pain in her great, black eyes. Rukh felt nothing but kindness for the girl: she had borne him La-swak, she had bored and had disappointed

him less than any other of his women ever had, and he and her father were close-sworn friends—they had throttled a half-grown wild beast together, and speared a great snake, they had shared war and blood-feuds, and frolic and schemes; but Rukh was engrossed with his boy. He did not even see Ko-sak go, scarcely knew she'd been there.

The child dozed. Ak-kok tugged at Rukh's arm, and he rose and too went quietly out, through the long, twisted corridors with the great columns and arches back to his own room.

Just before he left the harem quarters he came upon a girl, almost a child, sitting idly and alone, on the wide seat of a window's embrasure, the gay strip of embroidered stuff she'd been working lying neglected where it had fallen from her listless fingers on to the mosaicked floor at her feet. She caught his footfall, turned her head carelessly, flushed passionately, rose quickly, and salaamed deeply. Rukh was in no mood for such companionship now, and well could have spared the encounter—but he paused, and spoke to her kindly, laying his hands on her shoulders; for she was big with child. A wild rose stained the pale amber of her delicate face, the terror faded out of her dark childish eyes; and Rukh knew she would have pressed her face to him, and clung, staying him so, had she dared.

"Nay, Zu-kunl," he told her soothingly, "it is not too much, it lasts not long, your midwife is skilful, the auguries are kind, and the joy that it brings is a woman's sweetest and proudest."

"My lord!" she whispered. "If the child should be but a girl?"

He shrugged indulgently. "Some must," he said,

"and if it is as fair, and as obedient as you, I will forgive it and thee."

The girl caught his hand and bent her brow to it. Her eyes pleaded with him to stay with her a little, and he saw it. He touched her sheened hair fondly, as one pats a dog, nodded gayly, and went on his way.

The girl's face quivered, and tears gathered in her big, frightened eyes. But she only salaamed again—it hurt—and whispered, "My lord!" meekly and softly. Should she ever see him again? He came to her but seldom, the lord she adored, the only man, save father and brothers, she had seen since her childhood, the only man she ever would see again though she lived to be as old as Ak-kok. Should she ever see him again? She had not seen him often. Would he come once more? Already she knew that her pain was on her. She waited, battling it where she stood, until the great outer door was closed and barred behind him, and then groped her way to the darkened inner room where the midwife waited, and all lay ready for her agony.

And the Raja of Rukh whistled happily as he went back to finish his dressing, happy because La-swak was well again.

And that was why the three English people waited so long alone in the room below, and the chef in the palace kitchen fumed, and would have given notice, or, at least, sworn, had he dared.

Rukh had thought of the English doctor below as he knelt by his child, and, had La-swak's illness not gone as swiftly as it had come, would have summoned Traherne, and entreated his help. If he had, there'd have been a fine Oriental to-do in one harem room, and old Ak-kok would have achieved something little short of murder, or have gone raving mad again in

attempting it. And this story need not have been told—for it would have ended there with handshakings and gifts, and safe escort homeward: for vicious, brutal, implacable, the Raja of Rukh would not have proved ungrateful: it was not in his Asian mountain blood.

The Raja finished his dressing leisurely, and went to his guests. But the great ruby no longer blazed in his turban. La-swak had demanded it, when he'd drunk, and Rukh had unfastened it, and it was close shut now in the sleeping baby's little brown hand, and the osprey of diamond specks was spread out fan-like, sparkling brilliantly on La-swak's fat little brown paunch.

But the Raja wore one jewel—he might have lost that too had he worn it to the sweetmeat-sick-room—the ribbon and star of a Russian order which only the anointed hand of the Little White Father could give, and did not give often. Alas for it now!

Much as they feared him, they were glad to see him: the uncertainty was growing increasingly intolerable, and, frankly, they all three were hungry.

He bowed to the men, and went to Mrs. Crespin. "Pray forgive me, Madam," he said, "for being the last to appear. The fact is, I had to hold a sort of Cabinet Council—or shall I say a conclave of prelates?—with questions arising out of your most welcome arrival."

It was perfectly true. There had been grave talk in the Council Chamber of Rukh, before the Raja had left it to lay off his native dress, and "change for dinner."

Before Mrs. Crespin could answer, the Major said

eagerly, "May we hope, Raja, that you were laying a dawk for our return?"

Rukh laughed pleasantly. "Pray, pray, Major, let us postpone that question for the moment. First let us fortify ourselves; after dinner we will talk seriously. If you are in too great a hurry to desert me, must I not conclude, Madam, that you are dissatisfied with your reception?"

"How could we possibly be so ungrateful, Your Highness," she said. "Your hospitality overwhelms us."

Rukh swept his eyes over her slowly, as she stood before him—she had risen at his entrance—and then he said deferentially, "I trust my Mistress of the Robes furnished you with all you required?"

The Englishmen frowned a little at his question—they did not dare go beyond that—but Lucilla smiled gravely, and told him brightly, "With all and more than all. She offered me quite a bewildering array of gorgeous apparel."

"Oh, I am glad." There was just a caressing note in the Raja's voice, more than a hint of velvet, as there so often is in the high-bred Asiatic voice when it speaks a foreign tongue. And again the long, close-lidded Oriental eyes swept her slowly with a something of appraisement. Traherne saw it, and chafed, but what could he do?—"I had hoped that perhaps your choice might have fallen on something more—" his eyes indicated "décolleté" even more than the graceful gesture of his slender olive hand. It was delicately done, but his unspoken meaning was unmistakable. Traherne threw an ugly quick look to Major Crespin, but Crespin had strolled to the loggia opening, and

seemed to have seen or heard nothing. Had he gone to be nearer the big wine-cooler? Traherne wondered viciously. But again what could Crespin do? Nothing that would not aggravate their peril. "But no," the soft silken voice said on, "I was wrong—Madam's taste is irreproachable."

A white-clad servant, with the Raja's livery of green and silver and gold twisted in his *puggree,* came in bringing cocktails. Lucilla Crespin was glad of the interruption, and made the man's approach serve for that. She shook her head at the salver he proffered her, and moved away to a table, and picked up a book.

The men drank. Traherne's throat felt as dry as Crespin's for once, but when Rukh put down his glass he followed Mrs. Crespin, and glanced at the yellow paper-bound volume she held.

"You see, Madam," he said to her, "we fall behind the age here. We are still in the Anatole France period. If he bores you, here"—he offered her another book—"is a Maurice Barrés that you may find more amusing."

"Oh," Mrs. Crespin told him, as she took it—she had to take it—"I too am in the Anatole France period, I assure you." She glanced a little apprehensively at the titled back of the newer book, and a shade of relief touched her face. "'Sur la Pierre Blanche'—isn't that the one you were recommending to me, Dr. Traherne?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Yes, I like it better than some of his later books," Traherne replied, joining them at the book-covered table.

The Raja spoke again to Lucilla. "Are you fond of music, Mrs. Crespin? But, of course, you are!"

The servant tells his master, the Rajah of Rukh, about the evil omen.
(George Arliss' screen version "The Green Goddess.")

"Why?" she demanded gayly.

Rukh looked into her eyes. "It is written—there," he told her softly. "Suppose we have some during dinner." He went, as he spoke, to the gramophone in the corner, and began turning over a stack of records that lay beside it, and put one of them carefully on the top of the pile, just as Watkins came noiselessly in from a door, and the major-domo as silently from another. "Watkins, just start that top record, will you. Ah!"—the native servant, salaaming had spoken—*"Madame est servie!* Allow me—"

And Mrs. Crespin laid her white hand on the brown man's black-sleeved arm.

"I can recommend this caviare, Major," Rukh said when they were seated—"and you'll take a glass of maraschino with it—Russian fashion?"

Crespin would.

The gramophone reeled out its first, slow bars, and a wonderful sunset flooded the loggia.

"Oh, what is that?" Lucilla asked after she'd listened a moment.

"Don't you know it?" Rukh questioned.

"Oh, yes, but I can't think what it is."

"Gounod's 'Funeral March of a Marionette,'" the Raja said in an odd voice, an odd look in his narrowed eyes—"a most humorous composition. May I pour you a glass of maraschino, Madam?"

CHAPTER XXVI

THE dinner was sumptuous; better still, it was perfect. What a magician wealth was, Traherne mused; and Major Crespin enjoyed it immensely. The Raja was a jolly good fellow, whatever the color of his skin, damned if he wasn't. Any chap who did one as well as that was a man and a brother: the excellent food, the exquisite and welcomer wines, had lulled to fast sleep the English soldier's every fear. He was at peace with all the universe, Asia and Germany included, especially Asia: to hell with silly race-distinctions!—good fizz knew none.

The *Funeral March* pulsed through the loggia. The sky was the color of blood. When the record was finished, Rukh called for no other—Watkins waiting at the gramophone had a sinecure.

Antony Crespin was drinking too much. Traherne watched him through angry eyes; Rukh, not seeming to look, with an inscrutable smile. Lucilla was nervous and wretched. Surely he could have spared her this—here! He might have controlled his craving until he had reached his own room, and have asked there for what he craved—he would only have needed to ask in this palace of sumptuous and pressed hospitality.

But Crespin could not wait. He was doing his best. And, Traherne thanked heaven for it, he was eating heartily.

Traherne ate well too—doing it in careful forethought of what might be before him to do—or to attempt. And Lucilla Crespin ate as much as she could. She too was doing her best.

The Raja ate sparingly, without seeming to do so, and drank very little. But he chatted entertainingly all the time: the perfect host, considerate and quietly cordial—and if the woman who sat on his right hand received most of his attention, and all his deference, he, in that, paid their own European custom the sincere flattery of imitation.

The meal was long—not too long. The sunset glow faded, great stars pulsed green, white and gold in the strip of purple sky between the o'ertopping, high, snow-covered mountains. Dessert in great cut-gold bowls was put on the table. Watkins came and touched a switch, and when the table sparkled with electric lights among the flowers on it, and others above it, came and stood behind his master's chair. The old major-domo and his white-clad satellites with the Raja's livery of gold, silver and green twisted in their turbans hovered watchfully round.

A child cried somewhere—out in the mountain-pass open it sounded—and the Raja paused suddenly in what he was saying, a look of fear in his face, and dark as his skin was, it seemed to whiten and stiffen. Both Lucilla Crespin and Dr. Traherne saw and wondered—but Traherne made a quick note in his mind: he thought he had learned the tiger-man's raw, vulnerable point—and he would not forget: the clue might be useful to them in their need. It all passed in an instant. The Raja laughed lightly, and went on with his story. La-swak's room lay far on the other side of the palace; no sound from it could reach here. And, if aught again had ailed La-swak, Ak-kok would have come or have sent, though a bevy of Western kings had been dining, or even an Eastern god!

"What a heavenly night!" Mrs. Crespin murmured.

The words were trite; and because they were trite they were lame and inadequate. It was starlight on the Himalayas. Every star hung out from the deep, velvet sky as if chiseled and cut from precious stones, and the snow of a hundred peaks and slopes literally reflected their jewel-colors, and the crisp night air was warm too by the fragrance of the "evergreens" that soaked it. The night was still, but it pulsed with its own beauty, and here and there where some stray eddy of soft wind caught it a tree on a lower slope was bending as if in prayer.

"Yes," Rukh assented carelessly—careless of what was ordinary, not of her, or her words—"our summer climate is far from bad."

"The air is like champagne," she said with a long, slow breath of enjoyment. "Was she enjoying it?" Traherne asked himself. "*Could* she enjoy it here?"

"A little over frappé for some tastes," the Raja suggested. "What do you say, Madam? Shall we have coffee indoors? There is an edge to the air at these altitudes, as soon as the sun has gone down."

"Yes, I do feel a little chilly now," she owned, and she shivered slightly.

"Watkins, send for a shawl for Madam," Rukh said in quick concern, rising quickly. The others rose with him, of course. They had to play the social game with this native princelet upon whose whim so much depended for them. Traherne was playing the game very valiantly; Lucilla Crespin was not sorry to go back to the warmer room; and the Major felt something of actual deference to the host, no matter the shade of his skin, who had given him such a rippin' dinner—and such wines! At a word from his master the major-domo touched a second switch in one of the pillars of

the loggia opening, and the chandelier and wall-lamps of the salon burst into brilliant light. Rukh offered his arm to Mrs. Crespin, and again the Englishwoman had to take it.

"Let me find you a comfortable seat, Madam," he said as he led her in, and bowed when he had guided her to a great lounge chair. "When the fire is lighted, I think you will find this quite pleasant. Take the other chair, Major. I must really refurnish this room," he observed critically. "My ancestors had no notion of comfort. To tell the truth, I use the room only on state occasions, like the present"—again he bent to Mrs. Crespin. "I have a much more modern snuggery upstairs, which I hope you will see to-morrow." It was quite courteously said, but there was invitation in his soft black eyes, a hint of it and of caress in his voice. Lucilla caught it, and so did Basil Traherne. She gave no sign, but Traherne still standing at the loggia opening, looking out into the night, clenched his strong, brown fingers until his nails cut the flesh. But he did not dare turn. And Crespin—poor chap—heard nothing, saw nothing. He was feeling a little sleepy, and quite full of content, and he smiled a lazy approval at the servants bringing in coffee, liqueurs, cigars and cigarettes.

"Star-gazing, Dr. Traherne?" the Raja asked him.

Traherne turned at that, and came to the others. "I beg your pardon," he said.

"Dr. Traherne is quite an astronomer," Lucilla told the Raja.

"As much at home with the telescope as with the microscope, eh?"

"Oh, no," Traherne told him, "I'm no astronomer. I can pick out a few of the constellations,—that's all."

"For my part," the Raja declared, "I look at the stars as little as possible. As a spectacle they're monotonous, and they don't bear thinking of. Ah, here it is!" He took the shawl the woman had brought, and placed it delicately about Mrs. Crespin's shoulders.

"What an exquisite shawl!" she exclaimed, drawing an end of it through her fingers.

No self-respecting trousseau in affluent Christendom would have thought of lacking its "Indian shawl" fifty years ago, and one winter—just thirty-seven years ago to be exact (even at the risk of owning to old-age well reached) every well-dressed woman in Chicago had one of the costly things hacked up into cloaks and dolmans. And beautiful some of those "Indian shawls" were—and (more to their advertised point) probably most of them had been made in India. But this was a shawl not as those. It was warmer, softer and incomparably more thin. From the burning Indian red of its silky, sheeny center every color on the Asian palette blended and blurred into and accentuated all the others, and so did half a score of Oriental motifs—turquoise-blue, apple-green, orange and emerald touched milk-white and velvet-black, crimson, rose, ruby and scarlet, rippled like the notes of a scale masterly played, and the half-hinted motifs that patterned it as indescribably as the fallen snow patterns the panes it frosts in the Canadian midwinter, and the beautiful curves of the "pineapple" and "palm-leaf" ran through them all like its theme through a poem.

"It is the most beautiful made-thing I have ever seen," Mrs. Crespin said.

"And most becoming." Rukh smiled into her eyes as he spoke, his look not quite as light as his words. "Don't you think so, Doctor?" he added a shade quiz-

zically, for Traherne was gazing fixedly at Mrs. Crespin, with a look too in *his* eyes. He flushed at the Raja's words and shifted his glance without answering; Rukh laughed softly, and let it pass.

"My Mistress of the Robes has chosen well!" He motioned his beautiful, slim hands in noiseless applause to the ayah, who grinned, and went, as she'd come, not making a sound.

"Why won't the stars bear thinking of, Raja?" Lucilla asked.

"Well, dear lady, don't you think they're rather ostentatious? I was guilty of a little showing off to-day, when I played that foolish trick with my regular troops. But think of the Maharaja up yonder"—he pointed up to the firmament outside—"who night after night whistles up his glittering legions, and puts them through their deadly punctual drill, as much as to say, 'See what a devil of a fellow *I* am!' Do you think it quite in good taste, Madam?"

The Punjabi mem-sahib was only veneered on the vicarage girl; Lucilla was shocked, and tried not to show it, playing the game, and with a forced, thin smile studied her shoe.

But Traherne laughed frankly. "I'm afraid you're jealous, Raja! You don't like having to play second fiddle to a still more absolute ruler."

"Perhaps you're right, Doctor," the Rajah owned; "perhaps it's partly that. But there's something more to it. I can't help resenting—"

He interrupted himself to urge Crespin to "try" the Kümmel a servant was offering him.

Lucilla bit her lip to keep back the, "Don't, Antony, please don't," that she wanted to say.

"What is it you resent?" Traherne asked.

"Oh," Rukh said, "the respect paid to mere size—to the immensity, as they call it, of the universe. Are we to worship a god because he's big?"

"If you resent his bigness, what do you say to his littleness?" Traherne objected. "The microscope, you know, reveals him no less than the telescope."

"And reveals him," Rukh added, "in the form of death-dealing specks of matter, which you, I understand, Doctor, are impiously proposing to exterminate."

"I am trying," Traherne amended, "to marshal the life-saving against the death-dealing powers."

"To marshal God's right hand against his left, eh? or *vice versa,*" the Raja demanded. "But I admit you have the better of the astronomers, in so far as you deal in life, not in dead mechanism." He slapped a palm sharply down on the back of his other hand. "This mosquito that I have just killed—I am glad to see you smoke, Madam: it helps to keep them off—this mosquito, or any smallest thing that has life in it, is to me far more admirable than a whole lifeless universe. What do you say, Major?"

"I say, Raja," Crespin replied lazily, and keeping his cigar alight, "that if you'll tell that fellow to give me another glass of Kümmel, I'll let you have your own way about the universe."

He got his Kümmel.

"But what," Mrs. Crespin asked, "if the mechanism, as you call it, isn't dead? What if the stars are swarming with life?"

"Yes—" Traherne agreed, and pushed her argument on, "suppose there are planets, which of course we can't see, circling round each of the great suns we do see? And suppose they are all inhabited?"

"I'd rather not suppose it," Rukh asserted quickly. "Isn't one inhabited world bad enough? Do we want it multiplied by millions?"

"But haven't you just been telling us that a living gnat is more wonderful than a dead universe?" Lucilla check-mated, or thought that she had.

But the Raja slipped through. "Wonderful?" he said. "Yes, by all means—wonderful as a device for torturing and being tortured. Oh, I'm neither a saint nor an ascetic—I take life as I find it—I am tortured and I torture. But there's one thing I'm really proud of—I'm proud to belong to the race of the Buddha, who first found out that life was a colossal blunder. 'His word was our arrow, his breath was our sword,'" he quoted softly.

"Should you like the sky to be starless?" Lucilla Crespin asked him in a low voice. (How like deep blue stars her eyes were! both he and Traherne thought.) "That seems to me—forgive me, Raja—the last word of impiety."

"Possibly, Madam," the Raja of Rukh said with a grave laugh. "How my esteemed fellow-creatures were ever bluffed into piety is a mystery to me. Not," he added, "that I'm complaining. If men could not be bluffed by the Raja above, how much less would they be bluffed by us rajas below. And though life is a contemptible business, I don't deny that power is the best part of it."

"In short," Traherne said, "Your Highness is a Superman."

"Ah, you read Nietzsche? Yes, if I weren't of the kindred of the Buddha, I should like to be of the race of that great man."

The last servant withdrew noiselessly. Till now they had hovered about with their trays of refreshments and tobacco.

Lucilla rose and moved to the loggia opening. "There is the moon rising over the snowfields," she said. "I hope you wouldn't banish her from the heavens?"

"Oh, no—I like her silly face"—he had followed Mrs. Crespin—"her silly, good-natured face. And she's useful to lovers and brigands and other lawless vagabonds, with whom I have great sympathy. I am an Oriental, you know. Besides, I don't know that she's so silly, either. She seems to be forever raising her eyebrows in mild astonishment at human folly."

Crespin stirred impatiently, and said, insistently, if a little thickly, "All this is out of my depth, Your Highness. We've had a rather fatiguing day. Mightn't we—"

"To be sure," Rukh replied agreeably—too agreeably, Dr. Traherne thought—"I only waited until the servants had gone. Now"—solicitously, always the perfect host—"are you all quite comfortable?"

"Quite," Lucilla assured him, sitting down again.

Rukh turned to Traherne. "Perfectly, thank you," the doctor said.

The Raja glanced to the Major, and Crespin echoed, "Perfectly."

The Raja lit a fresh cigar slowly, then stood with his back to the fire. "Then," he said leisurely, "we'll go into committee upon your position here."

"If you please, sir," Crespin said.

"I'm afraid," the Raja spoke regretfully, "you may find it rather disagreeable."

"Communications bad, eh?" Crespin inquired more

briskly than he altogether felt. "We have a difficult journey before us?"

The Raja of Rukh smoked a moment thoughtfully before he replied very, very slowly, a cryptic cold smile on his tawny face, "A long journey, I fear—yet not precisely difficult."

CHAPTER XXVII

A COLD something iced in the room. Out in the far open a bird of prey screamed exultantly. Somewhere in the palace a gong was struck, three barbaric, ominous, bellowing notes.

Rukh gave no sign that he listened, but he listened. A child was being born.

They were silent.

No one spoke, no one moved. But Rukh smoked on quietly.

When the silence had lasted so long that all their English nerves were tortured, and cried for relief, *any* relief, Major Crespin broke it, trying to speak naturally, and failing.

"It surely," he said, "can't be so very far, since you had heard of the sentence passed on those assassins."

The Raja smiled slightly. "I am glad, Major," he said smoothly, "that you have so tactfully spared me the pain of re-opening that subject. We should have had to come to it sooner or later."

There was another pause—an embarrassed pause. Rukh waited patient and imperturbable.

"When Your Highness"—Traherne spoke slowly, he was picking his words with care—"said they were your brothers, you were of course speaking figuratively. You meant your tribesmen."

"Not at all," the Raja replied; "they are sons of my father—not of my mother."

Lucilla Crespin turned to him quickly, and he turned his eyes away from the unmistakable sympathy in hers.

"And we," she cried impulsively, "intrude upon you at such a time! How dreadful!" And the Raja of Rukh knew that the woman had spoken and not the hostage.

"Oh, pray don't apologize," he begged formally, smothering from his voice the inevitable Oriental gratitude that stirred at his heart. "Believe me, your arrival has given great satisfaction."

"How do you mean?" Traherne demanded quickly. There had been nothing but menace and hardness in the Rukh's last sentence.

"I'll explain presently," the Raja promised. "But first—"

Crespin interrupted rashly, blundering in the accredited British way. "First, let us understand each other—" and his tone and manner were crassly mandatory. "You surely can't approve of this abominable crime?" he demanded—more as if Rukh had been his prisoner than he Rukh's.

"My brothers," the Raja said with an enigmatic smile, an ominous smoothness, "are fanatics, and there is no fanaticism in me."

"How do they come to be so different from you?" Lucilla Crespin asked him, again speaking impulsively —and it was ill-advised.

But Rukh showed no resentment. Traherne wondered if he felt none. Perhaps—Oriental susceptibilities, though quicker and sharper, differ widely from ours.

"That is just what I was going to tell you," Rukh answered. "I was my father's eldest son, by his favorite wife. Through my mother's influence (my poor mother—how I loved her!)"—Lucilla knew he said it sincerely; Traherne wondered if he did; and that he might never occurred to Crespin, who wished for the

love of Mike the fellow'd cut the cackle and get to the horses—*their* horses!—"at her wish I was sent to Europe. If only our women knew what that does to us! My education was wholly European. I shed all my prejudices. I became the open-minded citizen of the world whom I hope you recognize in me—" That was part sarcasm, part vanity, part a child's truckling for applause. The true Oriental is always a child. However old he lives, he whom the gods of the East love die young. "My brothers," he continued, "on the other hand, turned to India for their culture. The religion of our people has always been a primitive idolatry. My brothers naturally fell in with adherents of the same superstition and they worked each other up to a high pitch of frenzy against the European exploitation of Asia."

Traherne nodded; he was not altogether out of sympathy with that. But he said, "Had you no restraining influence upon them?"

The Raja smiled—it was not a sunny smile. "Of course I might have imprisoned them—or had them strangled—the traditional form of argument in our family. But why should I? As I said, I have no prejudices—least of all in favor of the British. My family is of Indian blood, though long severed from the Motherland—and I do not love her tyrants."

Again out in the open the bird screamed its horrid gluttonous cry.

"In short, sir," Crespin broke in—wine-fumes and fear both fuddling his mind, "you defend their devilish murder?"

"Oh, no," Rukh answered softly; "I think it foolish and futile. But there is a romantic as well as a prac-

tical side to my nature, and, from the romantic point of view, I rather admire it."

"Then, sir," Crespin blustered, rising, "the less we intrude on your hospitality the better. If you will be good enough to furnish us with transport to-morrow morning—"

"That," the Raja interrupted him suavely, "is just where the difficulty arises."

"No transport, hey?" Crespin's tone was bullying now. Oh, those English! Those English abroad!

"Materially it might be managed," the Raja said with an amiable shrug; "but morally I fear it is—excuse the colloquialism, Madam—no go."

"What the devil do you mean, sir?"

Still Rukh showed no resentment. And Lucilla, trying to cover a little her husband's blunder, asked gently, "Will Your Highness be good enough to explain?"

"I mentioned," the Raja asked, turning to her with a pleasant smile, "that the religion of my people is a primitive superstition? Well, since the news has spread that three Feringhis have dropped from the skies precisely at the time when three princes of the royal house are threatened with death at the hands of the Feringhi government—and dropped moreover in the precincts of a temple—my subjects have got it into their heads that you have been personally conducted hither by the Goddess whom they especically worship."

"The Goddess—?" Lucilla asked.

"Here"—the Raja turned and pointed to the statuette—"is her portrait on the mantelpiece—much admired by connoisseurs."

Lucilla looked, and shuddered, although she tried not to.

"I need not say," the Raja began, but broke off to count the gong-beats that came again, then went on with a slight good-humored shrug of contempt (it was only a girl) "need not say I am far from sharing the popular illusion. Your arrival is of course the merest coincidence—for me, a charming coincidence. But my people hold unphilosophical views. I understand—and indeed I observed—that even in England the vulgar are apt to see the Finger of Providence in particularly fortunate—or unfortunate—occurrences."

"Then," Crespin muttered impatiently, "the upshot of all this palaver is that you propose to hold us as hostages, to exchange for your brothers?"

"That is not precisely the idea, my dear sir." The Raja spoke with great courtesy—almost exaggerated. "My theologians do not hold that an exchange is what the Goddess decrees. Nor, to be quite frank, would it altogether suit my book."

"Not to get your brothers back again?" Lucilla exclaimed incredulously.

"You may have noted in history, Madam," he replied with a smile, "that family affection is seldom the strong point of princes. Is it not Pope who remarks on their lack of enthusiasm for a 'brother near the throne'? My sons are mere children, and, were I to die—we are all mortal—there might be trouble about the succession. In our family uncles seldom love nephews."

"So you would raise no finger to save your brothers?" the Englishwoman asked him in horror.

"That is not my only reason," Rukh said with a smile. "Supposing it possible that I could bully the

Government of India into giving up my relatives, do you think it would sit calmly down under the humiliation? No, no, dear lady. It might wait a few years to find some decent pretext, but assuredly we should have a punitive expedition. It would cost thousands of lives and millions of money, but what would that matter? Prestige would be restored, and I should end my days in a maisonette at Monte Carlo. It wouldn't suit me at all. Hitherto I have escaped the notice of your Government by a policy of masterly inactivity, and I propose to adhere to that policy."

"Then," Crespin broke in, "I don't see how—"

And Traherne, speaking at the same time, said, "Surely you don't mean—"

"We are approaching the crux of the matter," Rukh returned, "a point you may have some difficulty in appreciating. I would beg you to remember that though I am what is commonly called an autocrat, there is no such thing under the sun as real despotism. All government is government by consent of the people. It is very stupid of them to consent—but they do. I have studied the question—took a pretty good degree at Cambridge, in Moral and Political Science—and I assure you that, though I have absolute power of life and death over my subjects, it is only their acquiescence that gives me that power. If I defied their prejudices or their passions, they could upset my throne to-morrow."

Anthony Crespin was losing his head and his temper. "Will you be so kind as to come to the point, sir?" he stormed.

"Gently, Major!" Rukh said soothingly. "We shall reach it soon enough." He turned to Lucilla. "Please remember, too, Madam, that autocracy is generally a

theocracy to boot, and mine is a case in point. I am a slave to theology. The clerical party can do what it pleases with me, for there is no other party to oppose it. True I am my own Archbishop of Canterbury—'but I have a partner: Mr. Jorkins'—I have a terribly exacting Archbishop of York. I fear I may have to introduce you to him to-morrow."

Lucilla Crespin lifted a drawn face, but she looked him straight in the eyes—and there were both defiance and entreaty in hers. "You are torturing us, Your Highness," she told him simply. "Like my husband, I beg you to come to the point."

"The point is, dear lady," the Raja answered her sadly, "that the theology on which, as I say, my whole power is founded, has not yet emerged from the Mosaic stage of development: It demands an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—"

There was a pause.

"—a life for a life."

There was a pause—longer, tenser, a terrible hopeless pause. Crespin sagged in his chair, his miserable eyes fixed on his wife's face, seeing nothing, thinking of nothing but her. She sat where she was, statue-like in her motionless horror. Traherne never lowered his look from Rukh's expressionless face.

Again the wild bird cried, nearer now; they could hear the beat of its great angry wings.

Dr. Traherne spoke first. "You mean to say—"

"Unfortunately I do," the Raja replied.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE great wings beat nearer. The cruel bird-cry came again.

"You would kill us—?" Lucilla panted hoarsely.

"Not I, Madam; the clerical party," Rukh said suavely. "And only if my brothers are executed. If not, I will merely demand your word of honor that what has passed between us shall never be mentioned to any human soul—and you shall go free."

"But," Major Crespin exclaimed, "if your brother assassins are hanged—as assuredly they will be—you will put us to death in cold blood!"

"Oh, not in cold blood, Major," the Raja interjected, the edge of a laugh on his smooth, level voice. "There is nothing cold-blooded about the clerical party when 'white goats,' as their phrase goes, are to be sacrificed to the Goddess."

"Does your Goddess demand the life of a woman?" Traherne asked it sternly, and his eyes were scalpels.

"Well," the Raja of Rukh said with slow significance, "on that point she might not be too exacting. *'On trouve avec le Ciel des accommodements.'* If Madam would be so gracious as to favor me with her —society—"

Lucilla Crespin gazed at him speechless, for a moment, then realized fully his meaning, and sprang up with a cry of rage and anger.

The Raja smiled.

"Scoundrel!" Traherne hurled the word at him.

The Raja smiled.

Crespin sprang to the side of his wife, threw one

hand on her quivering shoulders, drew and leveled his revolver. "Another word, and I shoot you like a dog," he hissed. Antony Crespin was sober now.

The Raja laughed.

"Oh, no, Major—that wouldn't help a bit," he said genially—almost, too, as if he deprecated the fact. "You would only be torn to pieces instead of being beheaded. Besides, I have had your teeth drawn. That precaution was taken while you were at your bath."

Crespin took his hand from Lucilla's shoulder, and examined his revolver carefully and flung it down with an oath.

Again the gong sounded. It bleated through the night mournfully. A girl had died in child-bed. Rukh counted the strokes. "That's a pity," he said as the last faded away, and he lit a fresh cigarette.

The Englishwoman turned to her men. "Promise me," she said almost fiercely, "promise you won't leave me alone! If we must die, let me die first—" and her voice broke on the words.

They nodded. Neither could speak.

But the Raja spoke. "The order of the ceremony, Madam," he said with courteous, princely insolence, "will not be at these gentlemen's choice." She hid her face in her hands, and stood cowering in distraught despair. "But do not be alarmed. No constraint shall be put upon your inclinations. Dr. Traherne reproached me with lack of consideration for your sex, and I then hinted, if you so pleased, your sex should meet with every consideration. I gather that you do not so please? Well, I scarcely hoped you would—I do not press the point. None the less, the suggestion remains open. And now, I'm afraid I've been talking

a great deal. You must be fatigued," he added solicitously.

At that moment the major-domo stood at a door, holding a salver with a slip of paper folded on it. The Raja gestured him nearer, advanced to meet him, and took up the paper, and scanned it thoughtfully. But his face did not change.

"Ah, this is interesting!" he told them. "If you will wait a few minutes, I may have some news for you. Excuse me." He bowed as he left them, and the old major-domo followed him from the room.

The clocks ticked almost a minute away.

They stayed as if frozen, where he had left them, and gazed at each other in speechless horror. The men thought that they heard the woman's heart beat.

"And we were saved this morning—only for this!" Lucilla sobbed brokenly at last.

"Courage!" Traherne said, with his soul in his eyes, his heart in his voice. "There must be some way out."

"The whole thing's a damned piece of bluff!" Crespin cried with a gust of hysterical laughter. "And the scoundrel almost took me in."

Bluff! They looked at him in pitying amazement. They both pitied him then. And they knew it was no bluff.

Lucilla caught suddenly at her throat, catching her locket convulsively in her icy fingers. "Oh," she sobbed, stumbling down on to the big ottoman in a passion of grief, "my babies! Oh, my babies! Never to see them again!" Crespin's face twisted. "To leave them all alone in the world! My Ronny! My little Iris! What can we do? Antony! Dr. Traherne! Think of something—something—"

Crespin sat down beside her, and took her hands in his. And she did not repulse him now. He was *their* father. She forgot his cups, that had shamed her, forgot the infidelities that had stung and infuriated her womanhood and pride. In this unspeakable peril he was her husband again. And she turned to him with an agony of entreaty in her terrified eyes.

"Yes, yes, Lu," he said tenderly, "we'll think of something—"

"There's that fellow Watkins," Traherne suggested desperately; "we might bribe him—"

"Oh," Lucilla gasped, "offer him every penny we have in the world!"

"I'm afraid he's a malicious scoundrel," Traherne reflected aloud, dismally. "He must have known what was hanging over our heads, and, looking back, I seem to see him gloating over it."

"But, he is English," Lucilla said fiercely.

"Yes," Traherne said dully, "he *is* English."

"And a damneder cur than the 'master' whose feet he washes, if you ask me," Crespin muttered gloomily.

"Still—still—" his wife persisted, "perhaps he can be bought. Antony! Think of the children! Oh, do let us try!"

"But even if he would," Crespin told her gently, "he couldn't guide us through the woods."

"Oh," she answered passionately, "he could hire some one else!"

"I don't believe," Traherne said thoughtfully, "we can possibly be so far from the frontier as he makes out."

"How far did he say?" Lucilla exclaimed eagerly.

"Three weeks' journey," Traherne told her.

"Yet they know all about things that happened less than a week ago."

Crespin bent down, and picked up thoughtfully the revolver he'd thrown down in his rage. At least it would serve to brain one native, he reflected.

As he slipped it back in his belt, all the electric lights in the room went down suddenly, and as they did, a hissing and chittering sound buzzed faintly out unmistakably somewhere beyond the room.

"What is that?" Lucilla whispered, startled. "What an odd sound!"

"God!" Antony Crespin muttered hoarsely—a strange, eager look on his face.

"Major! Do you hear that!" Traherne cried.

"Do I hear it?" Crespin echoed exultantly. "I should say so!" and he sprang to his feet, listening, his head thrown back, his eyes glowing, and fixed on the ceiling.

"Wireless!" Traherne exclaimed.

"Wireless, by Jupiter!" Crespin swayed in his intense excitement—his voice danced.

"They're sending out a message!"

"That accounts for it," Traherne said.

"They're in wireless communication with India!"

"Fools, not to have thought of it," Crespin muttered. "He would be!"

"Antony knows all about wireless," Lucilla panted, speaking to Traherne.

"Ought to!" the Major said grimly. "I should rather think so! Wasn't it my job all through the War! If I could hear more distinctly now—and if they're transmitting it clearly—I could read their message."

"That may be our salvation!" Traherne said in a low, strained voice.

CHAPTER XXIX

THEY drew closer together—one, not three in their sudden hope, which tingled through the very room vibrantly as the telegraphist's speaking wire's words tingle through the air or ocean they charge.

"If we could get control of the wireless for five minutes," Crespin muttered, "and call up the aerodrome at Amil-Serai—"

"What then?" Lucilla whispered wildly.

"Why, we'd soon bring the Raja to his senses," Crespin told her.

"If—" Dr. Traherne said under his breath.

"Where do you suppose the installation is?" Mrs. Crespin asked her husband.

"Somewhere overhead, I should say," Crespin replied. And they hung on his simple words. The specialist had come into his own. The wife who had discarded and judged him, the friend who had despised and pitied, looked at him with quick respect. He was in command now. Their peril and his special equipment made them look up to him. It is human nature to hold as a god every possible friend in dire need. Any port in such storm!

"We must go very cautiously, Major," Traherne reminded him, with a note of deference in his voice. "We must on no account let the Raja suspect that we know anything about wireless telegraphy, else he'd take care we should never get near the installation."

"Right you are, Traherne," was the cheerful reply. "I'll lie very low."

Suddenly noticing it, and remembering, Mrs. Cres-

pin flung the costly Eastern shawl from her. "And how," she demanded, "are we to behave to this horrible man?"

"We must keep a stiff upper lip, and play the game," Crespin insisted.

"You mean pretend to take part in his ghastly comedy of hospitality and politeness?" his wife protested.

"If you can," Traherne urged quickly, "it would be wisest. We must play the game indeed, and not lose a trick we can possibly help. His delight in showing off his European polish is all in our favor. But for that he might separate us and lock us up. We must avoid that at all costs."

"Oh, yes, yes—" Her eyes widened with horror at the suggestion, and her words were almost a sob.

"You've always had plenty of pluck, Lu," Crespin said proudly, but the hand he laid again on her shoulder trembled in spite of him. But his grave voice was steady. "Now's the time to show it."

She met his eyes more kindly than she often had of late, and nodded firmly. "You can trust me," she told him. She drew the shawl carefully over her shoulders again, a cold smile on her mouth, and her hands did not tremble. "The thought of the children knocked me over at first, but I'm not afraid to die," she added simply. It was perfectly true. She came of stock that never had been afraid to die. And, a little narrow in some ways, but good and sound in all, such women as this have no need to be afraid to die. "Hush!" she whispered suddenly, "the noise has stopped." And the chittering sound had ceased as abruptly as it had begun, and the lights had gone up as suddenly.

"Yes," Crespin said, "they've left off transmitting, and ceased to draw on the electric current."

"He'll be back presently, then," Traherne warned, flinging himself in an easy chair. "Don't let us seem to be consulting."

Lucilla leaned back luxuriously on the ottoman cushions, and readjusted a fold of the shawl—a lazy smile on her pallid face. Perhaps she felt its pallor, for she crushed and pinched it quickly with strong determined fingers. Crespin watched her proudly, as he selected and lit a cigar, and took the place where the Raja had stood with his back to the fire. It was devilish bad to be in the hellish fix they were in, but it was good to have such a wife—staunch and sporting all through. Then his face darkened with a new dismay. "Curse it!" he groaned, "I can't remember the wave-length and the call for Amil-Serai. I was constantly using it at one time."

"It'll come back to you," Traherne assured him encouragingly.

"I pray to the Lord it may!" Major Crespin muttered, as Rukh came back into the room.

"I promised you news," he said, more briskly than he often spoke, "and it has come." His quickened voice was perfectly calm, but his eyes were glittering with something their drooping lids could not hide.

"What news?" Major Crespin inquired casually.

"My brothers' execution is fixed for the day after to-morrrow," Rukh replied slowly.

The Englishmen showed nothing, but their nerves twanged. And Mrs. Crespin half rose, then sank back a little limply, as she exclaimed nervously, "Then the day after to-morrow—?"

"Yes," the Raja answered her gravely, "at sunset."

For a perceptible, painful pause no one spoke. Lucilla Crespin sagged a little where she sat, the palm-

leaf pattern on the shawl about her quivered a little. The men did not move, still gave no sign.

"But, meanwhile," Rukh continued, "I hope you will regard my poor house as your own. This is Liberty Hall. My tennis courts, my billiard-room, my library are all at your disposal." It was less cruelly meant than that he could not, even in the shadow of the impending doom he'd just pronounced, refrain from boasting. "I should not advise you," he went on, "to pass the palace gates. It would not be safe, for popular feeling, I must warn you, runs very high. Besides, where could you go? There are three hundred miles of almost impassable country between you and the nearest British post."

"In that case, Raja," Traherne asked perplexedly, "how do you communicate with India? How has this news reached you?" His perplexity was admirably done.

"Does that puzzle you?" Rukh asked indulgently.

"Naturally," the English physician admitted.

"You don't guess?" the Raja persisted.

"We have been trying to," Traherne said frankly. "The only thing—" he hesitated, almost as if apologizing for so far-fetched a suggestion, "we could think of was that you must be in wireless communication?"

Was that wise? Crespin wondered; and Lucilla was appalled. But Dr. Traherne had weighed his words well—and if he had spent fewer years in Asia than the English soldier had, he was the deeper versed, the better skilled in human psychology.

"You observed nothing to confirm the idea?" Rukh insinuated, watching Traherne narrowly, watching them all.

Dr. Traherne shook his head densely. "Why no," he affirmed.

"Did you not notice that the lights suddenly went down?"

"Yes," Traherne owned promptly, but still clearly at sea, "and at the same time we heard a peculiar hissing sound."

"None of you knew what it meant?"

"No." The doctor made the admission as if half-ashamed of it. No mere Englishman—as Rukh perfectly knew—cares to be found lacking in omniscience itself, let alone average intelligence (one reason perhaps of the old dislike that the English once bore the quicker French).

"Then you have no knowledge of wireless telegraphy?"

"None," Traherne replied disgustedly. And that well done self-disgust entirely convinced the Raja of Rukh—and he boasted again.

"I may tell you, then," he said with a sort of suave, princely truculence, "that that hissing is the sound of the wireless transmission. I am in communication with India."

"You have a wireless expert here then?" Crespin asked incredulously—taking up Traherne's cue at last.

"Watkins"—the Raja laughed—"that invaluable fellow—he is my operator."

"And with whom do you communicate?" Traherne asked, as if *he,* for his part, did not believe a word of the fairy tale.

"Do you think that quite a fair question, Doctor?" Rukh retorted with a smile. "Does it show your usual tact? I have my agents—I can say no more."

No one made any comment, or seemed inclined to keep the ball, or any ball, rolling.

The Raja waited a courteous moment or two, and then turned to Mrs. Crespin, and asked her, "Shall I ring for the ayah, Madam, to see you to your room?"

"If you please," she told him. She longed to stay or to go with her husband and their countryman—to be with them through the hideous strain of the night; but she thought it wiser not to make the request. Dr. Traherne would make it, if he deemed it advisable or worth while to venture it. But neither Traherne nor her husband spoke, and she rose almost immediately, as if to go. But as Rukh's finger was on the bell, she went to him quickly, staying his hand with a gesture of hers. "No," she begged him, "wait a moment. Raja, I have two children. If it weren't for them, don't imagine that any of us would beg a favor at your hands." It was bravely said, and Antony Crespin had never admired her more, but Basil Traherne bit his lip. It was ill-advised of her, no doubt of that. But if English men proverbially blunder and aggravate their own dilemma when they stand with their backs to a wall and fight against overwhelming odds, an English woman may be forgiven for doing it now and then. And Lucilla Crespin's English blood was up.

The Raja bowed courteously, and he smiled slightly.

"But," her voice broke, she was pleading now, "for their sakes won't you instruct your agent to communicate with Simla and try to bring about an exchange—your brothers' lives for ours?"

"I am sorry, Madam,"—he spoke regretfully—and, in spite of himself Basil Traherne believed that he was—and perhaps he was—"but I have already told you

why that is impossible. Even if your Government agreed, it would assuredly take revenge on me for having extorted such a concession. No whisper of your presence here must ever reach India, or—again forgive the vulgarity—my goose is cooked."

"The thought of my children does not move you?" she asked in a low, tearless voice.

"My brothers have children—does the thought of them move the Government of India?" Rukh answered gravely. "No, Madam, I am desolated to have to refuse you, but you must not ask for the impossible."

His Oriental heart was adamant, but in it the Asian autocrat was sorry for the Englishwoman, standing before him there, her white hands knotted together, grief, torture, supplication, and a personal and racial pride scarcely less than his own in her eyes. She would not have believed it of him. Antony Crespin could not have believed it of him. But Dr. Traherne saw it, and believed it. And while he resented it he tried to weigh and assay it, wondering how it might be used in their defense—or, at best, in hers. But what defense could there be for her that did not include theirs too: Crespin's and his—here alone in the Kingdom of Rukh?

The Raja pressed the bell.

"Does it not strike you," Mrs. Crespin demanded fiercely, "that, if you drive us to desperation, we may find means of cheating your Goddess? What is to prevent me, for instance, from throwing myself from that loggia?" She flung her arm towards it as she spoke, and the shawl fell away from her shoulder, and lay between them on the floor, a huddled heap of splendid colors. The Raja let it lie.

"Nothing, dear lady," he answered quietly, "except that clinging to the known, and shrinking from the un-

known, that all of us feel, even while we despise it. Besides, it would be foolishly precipitate, in every sense of the word. While there is life there is hope. You can't read my mind. For aught you can tell, I may have no intention of proceeding to extremities, and may only be playing a little joke upon you. I hope you have observed that I have a sense of humor. Ah"—as the native woman came in—"here is the ayah. Good night, Madam; sleep well." He bowed.

Lucilla thought he was going to give her his arm again, and the thought choked her—it shook her limbs. And Traherne feared it too. But the Raja walked gravely beside her to the door, without speaking again, without offering his hand when she'd reached it, bowed ceremoniously, and when the ayah had followed her into the corridor, closed softly behind the two women the door he had opened.

Lucilla looked him in the eye slowly and squarely before she went, turned and threw a swift, brave smile to the two Englishmen who still stood waiting impotent in the salon. Crespin smiled back at her; but Basil Traherne could not.

The Raja turned back to them from the door. "Gentlemen," he offered, "a whiskey and soda?" Major Crespin gestured his refusal, Traherne stared his blankly. "No?" He pressed another bell. "Then good-night, good-night," he said as two servants almost instantly came into the room.

Traherne and Crespin without a word or a look, turned on their heels and went side by side through the opened door, the native servants beside them.

Neither spoke, until at a turning the Raja's servitors indicated that the Englishmen separated there.

"Well, cheerio!" Crespin said.

"Cheerio!" Traherne replied.

They were English.

As their footsteps died in the stretch of the great corridor, Rukh went to the loggia opening, stood there a moment musing out into the snow-and-moonlit night, and came back to near the dark, almost dead fire. He took up a large electric torch from one of the tables, and switched on its powerful light, and when he had, switched off the lights of the room. The great salon was in total darkness now except for the moonlight and snowlight that poured in through the loggia, and for the one circle-pool of radiance that fell from the down-held torch on to the crimson center of the shawl on the floor.

Rukh moved to the mantel, and threw the strong light of the torch full upon the idol standing there, grinned at it slowly, made a low ironic salaam, and turned away, still smiling a little, lighting himself to the door. As he went the bird of prey screamed again, directly over the loggia now it sounded, so near that its wings might rasp against the roof—roosting there perhaps—an ugly, tuneless cry of an untamed, implacable thing, but lower and slower, more throated than it had sounded before—this sounded the monstrous gurgle of gluttony replete and content.

The great hovering beast-bird screamed once more. But the gong did not speak again.

CHAPTER XXX

IT took pluck—to go through it without a whimper, without one flicker of the white feather for any inimical other to see and report, or even for the solitude and their own tortured souls to see—what they had to go through that night—three of them, each alone, at bay, well-nigh in absolute despair, imprisoned in a wild far-off, unknown place. It took pluck. But they had it.

When the ayah had gone—dismissed by a smile and a gesture of thanks—the native woman not, Lucilla Crespin thought, utterly pitiless—Lucilla knelt down by her bed. She knelt there a long time, keeping a tryst her father had taught her.

When she rose she stood a while at the wide window looking out at the golden-white night, her face twisted in torture, but kindled from prayer.

Nowhere else does the maiden-hair fern grow as it grows in Rukh, in such few soil-filled cracks as the great mountains carry on their sides. From where she stood they looked to feather a world of imperial snow and grim stone exquisitely with filmy green. The light was so clear that every frond showed—and often the fronds were a foot long, but as delicately cut as those in English ferneries. At the base of the crag where the great horn stood a very meadow of them grew—with great trumpet-shaped flowers here and there among them. A lump came in her throat—her father had cared so much for his maiden-hair ferns! She looked away from them. She counted three temples,

snow-white in the moonlight. She shuddered. Should she live on through this night to die on a heathen temple floor? Or should she take *the other way*—now, if she could? Yes! No—they might escape it yet—and the babies!

She closed the silk-curtains, and went resolutely to bed. Her body was weary from the long flight, the crash, the harrowing incidents that had followed the forced landing, the worse that had followed—the strain in the salon, and at dinner, the terrible climax. Heavens, how tired she was! She would need the best use of her body to-morrow, if only to carry it bravely; wisest to rest it to-night. She might not be able to force her mind to rest—for, if her body was strained and tired, what of it!—but her muscles were hers still to command, and they should obey her, she'd lay them down, loosened, unfettered, and they at least should relax and rest.

She lay a long time, alone in that strange place, not knowing what might come to her there or when—she wished the native woman had stayed—why had she not detained her?—lay perfectly still, keeping tryst: tryst with her father, tryst with the old Surrey garden, tryst with her children, tryst with Antony as she had known and loved him before the knowing and love were spoiled, tryst with the first days she remembered—old dolls, old lessons, old games, old childish sorrows and joys. She kept tryst with her girlhood. She fed the pigeons again, she rode her first pony, and gave it an apple, a red wine-full one off the ribston tree near the garden pump, she gathered the roses from the bush she loved best and the heliotrope from her favorite bed. She kept tryst with her own faults, mistakes, failures—as we all must once in life at least.

She kept tryst with her own soul there alone in that strange, luxurious room which was the prison cell from which she might pass to her terrible mangling death. And she kept tryst too with that red, knifed death itself—God!

She fell asleep.

She dreamed, and once she smiled in her sleep.

But when she woke her champa-perfumed pillow was wet. Too, she had wept in her sleep.

Crespin sat all night on his bed, and thought. He too kept tryst. In such times of crisis and testing every human soul must do that. He thought of his babies, snug asleep now in Pahari while their faithful ayah lay on the floor between the two little beds, and a sentry far off in the cantonment called to some late-comer who had given the password, "Pass, friend. All's well." He thought of his mother—the mother for whom his fond, boyish passion and loyalty never had dwindled—he slipped his hand again in hers, he held her close in his arms, holding her reverently, all love and no judgment of her in his heart. He chalked up a long account against himself. He knew how he'd stumbled. But, too, he knew how he'd tried! And perhaps God did—and counted it more than Crespin counted it.

Traherne came through it worst of all. Till day broke he paced the floor, forming plan after plan, rejecting them one after one—all but one—planning how to send the woman who was Crespin's wife to a painless death, before he was put to death—if it came to that—to kill her with his own hand rather than leave her behind them, alone in Rukh; it must not come to that! It should not, he swore. But how? How? That was a difficult rub. The possibilities of escape

for all three of them, and how they should seize upon and use them must be left to chance, if by any great fluke such chance came at all. It would be idle to speculate upon that now. But how to kill Lucilla, how and when? But it must be done, if the other chance never came. In all probability it must be done. He shook at the thought, but worse he sickened at the fear of its failure. He had a few drugs with him, a few simple remedies—he was too good an airman and physician to fly without lozenges and ointments—and his miniature case was still intact in his flying kit there on the floor—but there was not a human death in the lot. How? Sweat broke out on his forehead. How? Somehow! That much was fixed. He'd strangle her, if needs be, with his hands, rather than leave her alone to this Raja of Rukh. With his own hands that had trembled in spite of his will, if by chance they had touched but some garment of hers, an intimate belonging even! He looked down at them. How they were trembling now! With the hands that had ached to caress her, to take a lover's right of her sweetness! Could *they* do it? And if she struggled—as the physician knew tortured human flesh must when agony gripped it, let the soul it housed be never so dauntless and fixed—if she struggled could he persist? He must —if it came to it. And his face fixed into tortured hardness, as might a surgeon's, forced to perform, in the absence of Surgery's holy handmaid and friend, Anæsthetic, a painful, major operation on his only child.

Traherne kept few trysts that night as he paced the floor of the palace room. But he registered a grim oath, never again, if he lived to escape from Rukh, to fly without either cyanide of potassium or chloroform.

But he'd not fly again, he thought, if he lived to be free. That last fatal flight in which he had piloted the woman he loved to a hideous death—or worse—had turned him forever sick of air goings. He went to the window, and looked out at the night in its pageant and splendor, and he cursed the Himalayas. He cursed them with gibbering lips, and he shook his fist at the great beautiful mountains.

Down near the little white temple the wing of his broken aeroplane caught his eye where it stuck out from behind a crag of rock, etched clear and sharp by the radiant moonlight. And he cursed the aeroplane too—the craft he had mourned almost boyishly—cursed it low and long, as men curse the things their own wrong handling has ruined, from women to shirt-studs.

What was she doing? How was it faring with her? Was she safe even now? At the thought and its fear he grew faint—the room swam—the mountains swayed. And he could do nothing! He sickened violently, actually, at the thought of what might be befalling her even now—while he stood here agape at a moon, and a theatrical painted scene of mountains and stones and sky!—and the thought of what she must be suffering in her solitude, even if diabolical revenge still left it inviolate, maddened him only less.

Antony Crespin and Lucilla, his wife, thought of many things as the hideous night hours wore away. But Basil Traherne thought only of one. Of the three he suffered the most—perhaps because his pain was concentrated. No thought of a career blasted, cut short, no regret for ambitions nipped and thwarted, crossed his mind for an instant. He no more thought of Science—mistress and wife, mother and child to him till Lucilla had come, not to usurp but to share its

throne—than he did of the Elgin Marbles or the Odes of Horace. Science had been his meat and his drink, the food of his soul, his motif of life. And if he had thought of that Science now, he would have cursed it too, as he had cursed the poor broken plane and the great snow-wrapped mountain peaks. Traherne thought of but one thing: Lucilla.

The Raja of Rukh too kept tryst as the far moon rode higher and higher, gilding the goat-tracks and the thin hill-rills, turning the temples and roofs to silver and gold, splashing the mountains with silver and gold, turning the gray rock crags into copper, the brown into russet and bronze. He sat alone, loose-robed, cross-legged on a nest of great cushions, his hands on his knees, his face turned to the Southwest where he knew Abdulabad lay. He kept no tryst with the girl-wife newly dead over there in the harem, the women wailing about her, strewing rose-leaves and incense and aguru over her garments, gave no thought to their new-born child. He gave no thought to the Englishwoman alone in her prison-chamber, none to the two Englishmen. He was in Abdulabad keeping their death-watch with his brothers. Oriental thought travels and visualizes, as the thought of no Western can. He was *with* them in their gaol. Their failure and capture galled him, the ignominy of the death by rope shamed him.

The Raja of Rukh had told Mrs. Crespin the truth. He loved himself first—if so small, so wormlike a thing as self-centered selfishness may be called by so big a name; and his children—above all La-swak—came next, his people third. For his sons' sake, above all for La-swak's, his regret at his brothers' capture was more than tinged with relief. It cut a troublesome

knot of his own, it left La-swak's succession comparatively safe. Masterly inactivity *was* his fixed conviction and purpose. He had no intention of rousing a British hornet's nest to buzz and sting about the fortress and huts of Rukh. He intended to keep his inheritance, his ease, his absolutism and his own skin intact. But, too, he loved his brothers. He suffered their pain, he shared their plight. Boyhood's friendliness, theirs and his, before he'd been sent to England, gripped and griped him. The Raja of Rukh kept their death-watch with his brothers, and mist gathered and thickened in his somber eyes.

He was in Abdulabad, and he did not hear a woman enter, or see her until she came close before him and salaamed more than once salaamed a little insistently at last.

Rukh glanced up slowly, and nodded to the ayah—Watkins' "wife"—to speak.

"She sleeps, Supreme One," the woman said. "I have brought it."

Rukh held out his hand, and the ayah, salaaming again, laid a little gold locket in his palm.

"Sleeps?" he questioned. "Is she drugged?"

"Nay," the woman told him. "I watched through the lattice, as Your Greatness commanded. Nothing has passed the Feringhi woman's lips since she left the great salon."

"No syringe? Her arm?"

"Not so, Royal Master, nothing."

"Who watches her now?" Rukh demanded.

"Po-nunk, Powerful One."

"So she sleeps! That is pluck! True pluck!" The Raja of Rukh liked pluck—it was the one masculine quality he approved of in a woman. So the English-

woman slept! He liked her for that. It might be just utter exhaustion, of course, trying to knit up the raveled sleeve of her long, hard day's care. But he believed it was pluck of character far more than fatigue of body. He believed it was pluck. And he preferred to think it that. He liked her for it! The brave, delicate one!

He opened the locket, and scrutinized its pictures thoughtfully.

"She bears beautiful children," he said with a thoughtful smile, as he handed it back. "Put it back again where it was. See that you do not wake her," he commanded.

As the ayah closed the door, he repeated softly, cruelly too, "She bears beautiful children."

He rose and rang a bell.

Watkins came—but not at once.

"Well?" the Raja demanded, speaking in English, "do they sleep?"

"Like hornets on the war-path, Your 'Ighness."

Rukh laughed.

"Good!" he said. "Has the Major asked for liquor?"

"For nothink, Your 'Ighness. Neither of 'em 'as asked for nothink."

"Remember not to stint them, if they do," the Raja ordered. "Make them perfectly comfortable—especially the Major. I rather like the Major, Watkins. That is all."

"Very good, Your 'Ighness, thank you," Watkins replied colorlessly, and left the room so quietly that he seemed to fade away.

Watkins went back to his divided watch deliberately —almost as if he took little satisfaction in it, and there was no truculence on his mean, bad face as he went.

He was not much English, but he *was* English. Old memories—not very pleasant ones though—were stirring a little, and presently, not knowing that he did, under his breath he whistled, rather in dirgelike time and color, a few bars of "The Old Kent Road."

Rukh stood in his casement, and looked out towards the Southwest, where Abdulabad lay behind the mountains. "You who are about to die, I salute you," he said. "Well," he added, "Kismet!" Then he crossed back to his cushions, loosened his robes still more, threw off his girdle, lay down on the comfortable pillows. And as the day broke over Rukh, washing the great snow-capped Himalayas with carmine and rose and violet and beryl-green, its Raja slept like a child.

CHAPTER XXXI

WATKINS opened the door of the Raja's snuggery, and withdrew as he ushered Crespin in, and Crespin came in sulkily enough. He looked about him quickly and apprehensively and finding himself quite alone, began wandering about aimlessly, nervous and irritable.

It was an uncommonly pleasant room—entirely European and modern, its comfort contrasting greatly with the old-fashioned and somewhat comfortless splendor of the great salon in which the Raja had entertained and mocked and sentenced them the night before. Everything was in exquisite order—the silver fittings on the fine writing table, the flowers in a vase and bowl or two—not too many—the papers and books, the pipes in their rack, and there was only one clock.

This room was high up in the great bastioned building; standing at the great open window, one seemed to be level with the distant high mountain peaks still rosy over their snow, across the narrow valley where sheep and goats, mere specks so far below, were browsing, and white, humped bullocks.

Crespin paid no respects to the scenery spread before him. The Alps could boast nothing to match this, but nothing in nature could appeal to Antony Crespin now. How could it? He grunted disconsolately. Then he stared at the doors, and counted them moodily. The doors appealed to him, if the scenic beauty did not. Doors whispered of escape. He tiptoed heavily to the large folding door that half filled one wall. He tapped

it softly but carefully, with speculative, anxious fingers. It felt a particularly solid and formidable door. Very cautiously he tried it. It was locked. With another unhappy grunt he turned back, and roamed aimlessly about the room.

"What a hell of a lot of books," he muttered disgustedly, "nothing but books. His Nibs must be a what-you-may-call-it, or want one to think he is." And the cozy, homelike snuggery was very full of books. Low bookcases lined all the walls, wherever there was available space for them; they were filled with serious looking modern books, but Major Crespin did not investigate that. On the top of one bookcase stood a large beautifully executed bust of Napoleon —which the English Major recognized. Over another, facing the writing-table, hung an admirable black and white portrait of Nietzsche—which he did not recognize. A few good sporting prints—Leach at his best—caught his eye, and would have held and delighted him at a more normal time. There was not a small chair in the place; all were roomy and inviting and luxuriously padded, most of them covered in green morocco to match the great luxurious couch. Crespin twirled the revolving bookcase, that stood to hand by the writing-table, about, and frowned viciously at its contents: the Britannica and lesser but erudite books of reference.

But a tantalus with attendant syphon and glasses attracted his notice next. "Hello! Good-morning," he told it. He hesitated unhappily a moment or two, looked over his shoulder stealthily, miserably; looked back at the whiskey-filled tantalus, and poured himself out a stiff peg. He held his glass up to the light, looking at it thirstily, gloatingly, put it down, and shuffled

about the room once more. He bit his lip, looked back at the liquor, looked away from it quickly, and moved resolutely to another closed door. It opened readily. Crespin peeped into the inner room, and closed the door again, muttering, "Billiards, begad!" Back to the writing table he fingered its silver. He picked up a vase, and snuffed at its flowers. He took up a paper. It proved to be *La Vie Parisienne,* and he threw it down with an insular and characteristic comment: "French muck!" Another paper lying on the couch caught his eye next. He went and got it—anything to keep his eyes and his fingers away from the tumbler in which the soda was going flat. This turned out to be printed in Russian. "My hat!" was his disgusted comment as he flung it down.

He hurried back to the revolving bookcase with the Encyclopedia, Roget's "Thesaurus" and "Who's Who" on its shelves, and cutglass and alcohol, alleviation and temptation, on its top, seized the tumbler he'd filled to the brim—the soda was dead, but that didn't matter, he'd not put much *soda* in it. His lips were twitching a little as he lifted to them the stimulant they craved. All his being craved it—needed it perhaps. On the point of drinking, the rim to his mouth, Antony Crespin hesitated again, shuddered a little, and hurried to the open window. "No," the man muttered, and pitched the liquid out of the casement. Antony Crespin, after a border "shindy," had been decorated and mentioned in despatches, for less than that. His face had paled when he put the glass back in its place. As he was doing it Traherne came into the room.

"There!" Crespin sniggered weakly, "you think you've caught me!"

"Caught you?"

"Lushing," Crespin persisted. "But I haven't been. I threw the stuff out of the window. God knows I wanted it, but for Lucilla's sake, I must keep all my wits about me." His voice cracked as he spoke, and at that, and the illness in his eyes, Traherne watching him wondered if he ought not to prescribe it. But instead he said cheerfully, "Yes, if we can all do that, we may pull through yet."

"Did you sleep?" Crespin asked.

"Not a wink. And you?"

"Dozed and woke again fifteen times in a minute," Crespin told him. "A hellish night."

"Have you any news of Mrs. Crespin?"

Crespin nodded. "But only this. She sent me this chit." He pulled the scrap of note-paper from his pocket, and offered it to Traherne.

Traherne took it, and read it slowly aloud. " 'Have slept and am feeling better. Keep the flag flying.' What pluck she has!" he exclaimed as he handed it back.

"Yes," Crespin said gravely, "she's game—always was."

"She reminds me," the other told him, "of the women in the French Revolution. We might all be in the Conciergerie, waiting to hear the tumbrils."

"It would be more endurable if we were," Major Crespin muttered huskily—"were in prison. It's this appearance of freedom—the scoundrel's damned airs of politeness and hospitality—that makes the thing such a nightmare." Mechanically he took up the tantalus again, and quite mechanically mixed himself another whiskey and soda. "Do you believe we're really awake, Traherne? If I were alone, I'd think the whole thing a nightmare; but you and Lucilla seem

to be dreaming it too." His voice husked again as he said it, and he raised the glass quickly. But again he remembered when it was just at his lips, and crashed the glass down. "Damn it!" The cut glass was thick, and it did not break.

"Some day," Dr. Traherne said wistfully, "we may look back upon it as on a bad dream."

Crespin shook his head moodily. "He does you well, curse him," he cried. "They served me a most dainty chota hazri this morning, and with it a glass of rare old *fine champagne.*"

"Yes," Traherne commented, "the Orientals know how to refine cruelty to the *n*th degree, when they choose. Where does that door lead?" he asked, pointing.

"To a billiard-room. Billiards!" Crespin laughed—and at the laugh's quality the physician looked at him anxiously.

"And this one?" he went on, in a moment, again pointing.

Crespin shook his head. "I don't know. It's locked—and a very solid door, too."

"Do you know what I think?" Traherne drew a step nearer, and spoke low.

"Yes," Crespin replied instantly; "and I agree with you."

"Opening off the fellow's own sanctum," Traherne went on.

Crespin nodded. "It's probably the wireless room," he said still lower.

They stood and looked at each other, steadily, significantly—saying nothing. There was no need.

"And what's out here?" Traherne was pointing to the window.

"Take a look," Crespin told him tersely.

Traherne crossed the room, and leaned over the window's sill. He whistled. "A sheer drop of a hundred feet," he pronounced slowly.

"And a dry torrent below," Major Crespin added insinuatingly. "How if we were to pick up our host, Traherne, and gently drop him on those razor-edged rocks?"

Traherne's eyes glittered hungrily, but he shrugged his shoulders discouragingly, and said, "As he remarked last night, they'd tear us to pieces the quicker."

"If it weren't for Lucilla, I'm damned if I wouldn't do it all the same," Major Crespin muttered.

Again they stood and stared into each other's faces —sharing a thought, baffled, at bay, but not "all in" yet, not defeated yet.

CHAPTER XXXII

SEVERAL moments passed, and neither moved, neither spoke again, neither lowered his eyes.

They stood so—still, grim, determined, but not yet seeing their way—when Rukh strolled into the room, debonnaire, spick and span in the latest Bond Street Rotten Row attire.

He accosted them instantly, jauntily, and hospitably. "Good-morning, Major! Good-morning, Doctor! How do you like my snuggery? I hope you have slept well?" Neither answered him. "No? Ah, perhaps you find this altitude trying? Never mind. We have methods of dealing with insomnia."

Antony Crespin answered him then. "Come now, Raja," he complained lustily; "a joke's a joke, but this cat-and-mouse business gets on one's nerves. Make arrangements to send us back to the nearest British outpost, and we'll give you our Bible oath to say nothing about the—pleasantry you've played on us."

"Send you back, my dear Major?" The Raja held up slim horror-shocked hands, but under their lowered lids his dark eyes danced wickedly. "I assure you, if I were ever so willing, it would be as much as my place is worth. You don't know how my faithful subjects are looking forward to to-morrow's ceremony. I have just come in from my morning ride, and in all my experience of them, I have never before been so acclaimed, met with such bubbling enthusiasm, such gratitude. They are children, and they are demented with their childish joy and anticipation of to-morrow.

If I tried to cancel it, there would be a revolution. You must be reasonable, my dear sir." He spoke in a low purring voice—a caress in it even—more vindictive, more implacable than any explosive show of hatred and malice could have been, and seated himself carelessly at his writing-table.

Crespin turned on him furiously.

"Do you think we would truckle to you, damn you, if it weren't for my wife's sake? But for her we'll make any concession—promise you anything."

"What can you that is worth a brass farthing to me?" Rukh retorted. "No." He spoke vehemently now, pent up ferocity storming out from angry voice, hate-full eyes and eloquent, quivering hands. "Asia," he hissed, "has a long score against you swaggering, blustering, whey-faced lords of creation, and, by all the gods! I mean to see some of it paid to-morrow!" His show of storm ceased as suddenly as it had come. He added suavely, "But in the meantime there is no reason why we shouldn't behave like civilized beings. How would you like to pass the morning? I'm sorry I can't offer you any shooting. I mustn't lead you into temptation. What do you say to billiards? It soothes the nerves. Here is the billiard-room," he told them, and opened the door. "I have a little business to attend to, but I'll join you presently."

"Of all the infernal, purring devils—!" Crespin broke out, beside himself with fury and impotence.

The Raja laughed indulgently. "Dignity, Major, dignity!" he reminded him with intolerable good-nature.

Crespin, almost demented, raised a threatening hand, but Dr. Traherne interposed himself determinedly between the seething Englishman and the still

smiling native, laid a firm reminding hand on Crespin's shoulder, and pushed and shepherded him across the floor, through the door, and into the billiard-room. And almost at once, Rukh, listening, heard the steady click of the billiard-balls.

They were playing the game again—and the Raja's face lit with an admiring smile. He liked their grit.

Indeed, it scarcely could be said that he did not also like—as individuals—the two men in there whom he certainly purposed to put to death the next day. He hated the thing they stood for, he resented their presence in Asia—because of what it signified and exampled, but he had no actual dislike either of Dr. Traherne or of Major Crespin. He had intense bias, unalterable convictions, but, in telling Lucilla Crespin that he had no prejudices, if he had boasted, he had but boasted a fact. And he had too acute a mind, and had lived and seen too much to bear ill-grudge for expressions of dislike and contempt wrung out of his prisoners by the torture of their dire plight. They were not Orientals—it was their misfortune, not their fault—and it was not to be expected that they should bear either anguish of mind or anguish of body with the suave dignity that an Oriental both by instinct and by the teaching of precedent would. "No man is bound to impossibilities." That, he remembered, was an old axiom of the Roman law—and of Nature's law too. The game went on—the last billiards the players would ever play—were they thinking of that? The even, careful click of the ivory balls came steadily in to him here. They were whispering, scheming, planning, of course, though no sound of it reached him where he sat at the writing-table. Let them. They were welcome to plan what they would. They were

powerless to do anything but meet with what fortitude of bearing they could the death he had decreed them—had decreed, and tomorrow at sunset would enforce.

Rukh drew a pad of paper a little nearer his hand, picked up a pencil, pressed the bell beside him, and fell to thinking how he should word what he was about to write.

"Your 'Ighness rang?" Watkins said, in a few moments, at the door.

"Come in, Watkins," the white servant's brown master ordered without looking up. "Just close the billiard-room door, will you?"

The valet glanced into the billiard-room as he was obeying. "They're good plucked 'uns, sir; I will say that," he blurted out admiringly as he came to the Raja's side.

"Yes," the ruler agreed, "there's some satisfaction in handling them. I'm glad they're not abject—it would spoil the sport."

"Quite so, sir," was the grim response.

"But it has occurred to me, Watkins," Rukh looked up for the first time, "that perhaps it's not quite safe to have them so near the wireless room. Their one chance would be to get into wireless communication with India. They appeared last night to know nothing about wireless, but I have my doubts. Most British service officers know something of it now. Tell me, Watkins, have they made any attempt to bribe you?"

"Not yet, sir," Watkins said cryptically.

"Ha, that looks bad," the Raja observed regretfully. "It looks as if they had something else up their sleeves, and were leaving bribery to the last resort. I want to test their ignorance of wireless. I want you, in their

presence, to send out some message that is bound to startle or enrage them, and see if they show any sign of understanding it."

"That's a notion, sir," Watkins exclaimed with a grin of applause. His manner when he and Rukh were alone was no less respectful—he knew that his head answered for that—but it was less wooden and servant-impersonal than it was before others. And when alone they invariably spoke English, as indeed they usually did at other times.

Rukh grinned back at Watkins. The child in him liked applause and sucked it, even from an inferior he despised.

"But," he said with a bothered frown, rising and moving aimlessly towards the wireless room, "I can't think of a message."

If that was an appeal, Watkins ignored it. He made no attempt to help the prince to a sufficiently effective and stinging message. Sage Watkins obeyed orders implicitly; he never assumed responsibility. If the Raja of Rukh fumbled and waited for a cue, the valet did not feel it his place to give it. And he had volunteered more now than he often volunteered. He stood perfectly still and waited—waited perfectly.

At the door of the wireless-room the Raja paused suddenly, and fingered the lock, making sure that it was well secure. And as he stood doing it the ayah opened the corridor door, and Mrs. Crespin passed by her into the snuggery. She did not see either Rukh or Watkins until she was well inside the room, and the ayah had reclosed the door she had opened, and had disappeared. It was too late to retreat, Lucilla knew, so she merely paused, and held her ground. She again wore the plain tweed frock she had worn in the aeroplane, the locket again at her throat, as it

had been when she'd waked, the wide silk scarf hanging carelessly over her shoulders. Her face was pale, but her eyes were feverishly bright, and she held her head—she had dressed it today, simply—proudly.

Rukh heard the door close, turned, and came to her quickly.

"Ah, Mrs. Crespin," he said cordially, "I was just thinking of you. Think of angels and you hear their wings. Won't you sit down?"

Lucilla Crespin ignored it all.

"I thought my husband was here," she said coldly.

"He's not far off," Rukh replied. "Just wait in there for a few minutes," he told Watkins, pointing to the wireless-room, "I may have instructions for you."

Watkins went at once, unlocking the door of the wireless-room with a key on his own ring, and closed it carefully behind him.

Then the Raja continued.

"Do, pray, sit down." She had not moved since she had seen that Rukh was in the room she had entered. "I want so much to have a chat with you," he urged her. At that—it seemed to her best—she sat down in silence, neither looking at him, nor seeming to avoid doing so. "I hope you had everything you required?" Rukh persisted, solicitously, as he reseated himself.

"Everything," she replied indifferently.

"The ayah?" he still persisted.

"Was most attentive," Mrs. Crespin said briefly.

"And you slept—?"

"More or less," she said with light contempt.

"More rather than less, if one may judge by your looks," the Raja of Rukh told her with something of warmth and emphasized admiration in eyes and tone.

Lucilla Crespin did not trouble to meet his eyes, but she heard the tone.

"Does it matter?" she retorted scornfully.

"What can matter more than the looks of a beautiful woman?" the Raja asked softly.

"What's that?" she exclaimed less listlessly, lifting her head suddenly, and listening.

"The click of billiard balls," Rukh told her. "Your husband and Dr. Traherne are passing the time."

"If you'll excuse me," she said ceremoniously, as she rose, "I'll join them."

But the man did not intend that. "Oh," he said with mingled deference and insistence, "pray spare me a few moments. I want to speak to you seriously."

She threw him a look then. There was nothing in it that he liked. But he only smiled back at her pleasantly. He could wait. The Raja of Rukh was skilled in waiting, as he was at most things.

Mrs. Crespin sat down listlessly. "Well—" she said wearily, "I am listening."

"You are very curt, Mrs. Crespin," Rukh said pleadingly, leaning his arm on the writing-table, as he seated himself at it again, and leaning his chin on his hand. "I'm afraid you bear me malice—you hold me responsible for the doubtless trying situation in which you find yourself."

"Who else is responsible?" she demanded, and her voice was certainly curt—as curt as it was cold.

"Who?" the Raja echoed. "Why chance, fate, the gods, Providence—whoever, or whatever, pulls the strings of this unaccountable puppet-show. Did *I* bring you here? Did *I* conjure up the fog? Could *I* have prevented your dropping from the skies? And when once you had set foot in the Goddess' precinct,

it was utterly out of my power to save you—at any rate the men of your party." The woman curdled at the significance he threw lightly but clearly into those last words, but she neither moved nor looked; her face was mask-like, expressionless, and her pallor took no change. "If I raised a finger," Rukh went on evenly, but saying it all very earnestly, "to thwart the Goddess, it would be the end of my rule—perhaps of my life."

"You know that is not true," the woman flashed out at him, her very contempt firing her to retort—which she had meant not to do, let him say what he might. "You could easily smuggle us away, and then face the people out. What about your troops?" she demanded. She was not pleading—yet.

"A handful, dear lady—a toy army," Rukh murmured regretfully, but vastly amused too. "It amuses me to play at soldiers. They could do nothing against priests and people, even if they were to be depended upon. And," he added emphatically, "they, too, worship the Goddess."

The woman smiled bitterly. "What you really mean, Raja," she said, looking him full in the eyes, "is that you dare not risk it—you haven't the courage."

"You take a mean advantage, Madam," the Raja sighed. "You abuse the privilege of your sex in order to taunt me with cowardice."

"Let us say, then," she replied bitterly, "that you haven't the will to save us."

He leaned across the corner of the writing-table, and with a beseeching gesture, begged, "Reflect one moment, Madam. Why should I have the will, at the risk of all I possess, to save Major Crespin and Dr. Traherne? Major Crespin is your husband—does that

recommend him to me? Forgive me if I venture to guess that it doesn't greatly recommend him to you." Lucilla gave him a haughty, outraged stare, but he continued, as if he had not seen it. "He is only too typical a specimen of a breed I detest: pigheaded, bull-necked, blustering, overbearing." Lucilla Crespin's rings were cutting her fingers, but she gave him no sign. "Dr. Traherne is an agreeable man enough—I dare say a man of genius."

"If you kill him," Lucilla interrupted quickly, and the Raja saw her bosom rise and fall, a faint color tinge her cheeks, a look of life creep into her face. He had stirred her at last! "If you cut short his work—you'll kill millions of your own race, whom he would have saved."

The Raja smiled—a little at her new eagerness, though it stung him—more at what she had said. "I don't know that I care very much about the millions you speak of," he answered quietly—more intent in watching her, and in trying to cut some breach in her seeming composure, than in the words he used. "Life is a weed that grows again as fast as death mows it down. At all events, he is an Englishman, a Feringhi—and, may I add, without indiscretion, that the interest you take in him—" the woman stiffened, and blanched again, and Rukh saw a vein swell and beat in her throat—"oh, the merest friendly interest, I am sure—does not endear him to me. One is, after all, a man, and the favor shown to another man by a beautiful woman—"

Without glancing at him, Mrs. Crespin rose slowly, and moved calmly towards the room where the ivory balls still clicked; but there was blood oozed under her wedding-ring.

But the Raja rose swiftly, and faced her, standing between her and it before she reached the billiard-room door.

"Please, please, Mrs. Crespin," he said entreatingly, and his eyes grew suddenly soft, "bear with me if I transgress your Western conventions. Can I help being an Oriental?" he asked with a slight, proud smile. "Believe me, I mean no harm; I wanted to talk to you about—" He broke off lamely, as if not knowing how to go on.

"Well?" she said imperiously, after a moment, a goad in her quiet tone, a taunt in her stern, angry eyes.

"You spoke last night," Rukh said very gently, "of —your children—"

She turned away swiftly, her self-control was wavering at last. He had hit the woman below the belt! The bad blow had crumpled her. She turned away, and she swayed a little as she moved.

"I think you said—a boy and a girl," the despot pushed his advantage home.

It was too much.

Every human mind, every human pride, every human courage; every human creature has its breaking point. Some may be spared ever reaching or knowing it. But always it is there. Lucilla Crespin had reached hers.

She threw herself down on the couch with a desperate cry. "My babies, my babies!" she sobbed.

Rukh winced. Give him his due—he was hurt for her grief. It did not budge him from his purpose. But for the moment, at least, his vengeance tasted sour in his mouth.

The billiard balls still clicked.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HE let her weeping wear itself out.

At last as it almost ceased, and the woman's sobs were but panted breath, he went a step nearer, and said earnestly, "I feel for you, Mrs. Crespin, I do indeed. I would do anything—"

She swung round where she sat, looked up at him, saw, though her smarting eyes were half blind from the tears they had shed, the sincerity in his eyes, as she had heard it in his voice. "Raja," she cried, in a tone she had not used to him before, "if I write them a letter of farewell, will you give me your word of honor that it shall reach them?"

Rukh bit his lip. His hands were trembling a little. At that moment he came nearer loving a woman, with a passion worthy that word, than he ever had done—save for the so different love, the love apart, he had given his mother. He had thought when she turned to him that she was about to beg of him her own life, her freedom. And she had not. She had asked that a letter from her might go to her children. He had been in England when his mother had died. *She* had written *him* a letter when she knew that she was about to die. He had it yet. A rough lump gathered in the throat of Rukh's Raja—and because his heart sickened at the refusal he must make—from his point of view he *must*—he steeled his voice, and spoke more stiffly than he felt.

"Ah, there, Madam," he said crisply, "you must pardon me! I have already said that the last thing

I desire is to attract the attention of the Government of India."

"I will say nothing to show where I am," she pleaded eagerly, "or what has happened to me. You shall read it yourself."

At the misery in her eyes, and the entreaty, at the white loveliness of her, at the queenly quality of her, at the call of her suffering motherhood, and too, at the call of her nearness, he was so stirred, so almost tempted to yield, that he answered her almost roughly.

"An ingenious idea!" He said it a little mockingly. "You would have it come fluttering down out of the blue upon your children's heads, like a message from a Mahatma. But, the strength of my position, you see, is that no one will ever know what has become of you. You will simply disappear in the uncharted sea of the Himalayas, as a ship sinks with all hands in the ocean. If I permitted any word from you to reach India, the detective instinct, so deeply implanted in your race, would be awakened, and the Himalayas would be combed out with a fine-tooth comb. No, Madam, I cannot risk it."

"Cannot?" Lucilla said with cold scorn; all her calmness was recovered now, her pulsing emotion frozen back by Rukh's hard refusal. "Cannot? You dare not! But you can and dare kill defenseless men and women. Raja, you are a pitiful coward!" Her cold, blue eyes scanned him tauntingly. She expected him to wince at that taunt. She had made it deliberately —playing the game now—as she gauged it. Appeal to his chivalry had failed, she was appealing to his vanity now.

But Rukh laughed unruffled. He read her. "For-

give me," he said, "if I smile at your tactics. You want to goad me to chivalry. If every man were a coward who took life without risking his own, where would your British sportsmen be?"

"I beg your pardon," the woman retorted with a sort of superb insolence; "a savage is not necessarily a coward." The Raja just flushed at that. "And now," she ended, rising again, "let me go to my husband."

"Not yet, Mrs. Crespin," he stayed her again. "One more word. You are a brave woman, and I sincerely admire you."

"Please—please—" she interrupted him fiercely, hotly angered by the very sincerity that she could not doubt.

"Listen to me," Rukh persisted firmly. "It will be worth your while. I could not undertake to send a letter to your children—" her face quivered again, but she stilled it, and shrugged her bitter contempt—"*but* it would be very easy for me to have them carried off and brought to you here."

She sprang round to him, half stifling a cry, and faced him, her own face frankly quivering now, the veins in her throat swelling palpably.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean," he told her slowly, saying it earnestly, "that, in less than a month, you may have your children in your arms, uninjured, unsuspecting, happy—if—"

"If?" the woman whispered hoarsely, and twisting the end of her long silk scarf in hysterical, trembling fingers.

"If—" Rukh answered gently, watching her narrowly—his eyes friendly and respectful—"oh, in your

own time, of your own free will—you will accept the homage it would be my privilege to offer you."

"That!"

It would have been answer enough for most men, it would have chilled the purpose of many, the purpose and any ardor behind it, the word as the English woman tossed it at him, with snaky venom in her blazing blue eyes. But Rukh went smoothly on, beating his terrible arguments in slowly and courteously. *"You have the courage to die,* dear lady—*why not have the courage to live?"*

She shuddered. That was her answer.

He waited a moment quietly, and then, "You believe," he continued, "that to-morrow, when the ordeal is over, you will awaken in a new life, and that your children will rejoin you. Suppose it were so: suppose that in forty—fifty—sixty years, they passed over to you: would they be your children? Can God himself give you back their childhood? What I offer you," he urged—and there was an odd sweetness in his Asiatic voice—"is a new life, not problematical, but assured; a new life, without passing through the shadow of death; a future utterly cut off from the past, except that your children will be with you, not as vague shades, but living and loving. They must be quite young; they would soon forget all that had gone before. They would grow to manhood and womanhood under your eyes; and ultimately, perhaps, when the whole story was forgotten, you might, if you wished it, return with them to what you call civilization."

Degrading, immoral—what you will, it had its points, the plan he unfolded. And the Raja of Rukh told it well. "And meanwhile," he pressed it on, "you are only on the threshold of the best years of your

life. You would pass them, not as a memsahib in a paltry Indian cantonment—I don't *see* you there—but as the absolute queen of an absolute king. I do not talk to you of romantic love. I respect you too much to think you accessible to silly sentiment. But that is just it: I respect as much as I admire you; and I have never pretended to respect any other woman. Therefore I say you should be my first and only queen. Your son, if you gave me one, should be the prince of princes, my other sons should all bow down to him and serve him. For, though I hate the arrogance of Europe, I believe that from a blending of the flower of the East with the flower of the West, the man of the future—the Superman—may be born."

Through all this Lucilla Crespin sat lax and motionless, gazing straight in front of her, her handkerchief pressed to her lips. And she gave no sign, none that the man could read, of what mark, if any, his words had made on her mind.

Rukh waited patiently. And at last she spoke to him in a low toneless voice—not turning her head, not moving her eyes.

"Is that all? Have you quite done?" she asked.

"I beg you to answer," the Raja insisted.

"I can't answer the greater part of what you have been saying," she asserted uninterestedly, "for I have not heard it; at least I have not understood it. All I have heard is, 'In less than a month you may have your children in your arms,' and *then,* 'Can God Himself give you back their childhood?' Those words have kept hammering at my brain till"—she held out her handkerchief, there was blood on it, and for the first time looked at him—"you see—I have bit my lip to

keep from shrieking aloud. I think the Devil must have put them in your mouth."

"Pouf!" Rukh laughed lightly. "You don't believe in those old bugbears."

"Perhaps not," she admitted curtly. "But there is such a thing as diabolical temptation, and you have stumbled upon the secret of it," she added desperately.

"Stumbled!" the Raja protested.

"Mastered the art of it, if you like," Lucilla conceded scornfully, "but not in your long harangue. All I can think of is, 'Can God Himself give you back their childhood?' and 'In a month you may have them in your arms.'"

"Yes, yes," Rukh prompted her eagerly, letting more of the genuine if foul feeling that swayed him show in voice and face than he yet had done, "think of that. In three or four weeks—I'll not lose a day, not an hour; now, at once—in three or four weeks you may have your little ones—"

She shook off his words as if they'd been some unclean smothering garment, and rose to her slender height, interrupting him passionately, "Yes—but on what conditions? That I should desert my husband and my friend—should let them go alone to their death—should cower in some back room of this murderous house of yours, listening to the ticking of the clock, and thinking, 'Now—now—the stroke is falling—now—now the stroke has fallen'—stopping my ears so as not to hear the yells of your bloodthirsty savages—and yet, perhaps, hearing nothing else to my dying day. No, Raja! You said something about not passing through the shadow of death; but if I did this I should not pass through it, but live in it, and bring my children

into it as well. What would be the good of having them in my arms if I could not look them in the face?"

She looked the Raja in the face.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MRS. CRESPIN looked Rukh full in the face, and at what he saw in hers his eyes almost fell. But as she passed to the door of the billiard-room he challenged her, "That is your answer?"

"The only possible answer," she returned quietly, and went on into the other room, and closed the door.

"But not the last word, my lady!" Rukh murmured to himself, as he stood looking after her.

And neither then nor after did the Raja of Rukh purpose this woman's death. Up to the slaughter she should go, square up to the block and the sword—if she would not yield before that—but not on to the sword-severed end. His purpose was other than that. And her resistance but whetted his purpose, steeled his will. If she yielded, would he keep the promises he'd made her? Many men will promise much to gain their end—when that end is a woman. Not all men fulfill such promises.

The Raja of Rukh had made Mrs. Crespin what he considered a very handsome offer—as he saw it, a tempting offer. But he had meant all he had said, had intended all he had promised. He had not forgotten La-swak when he had promised to make another his heir. But something in this Western woman had called him irresistibly. The light women "mostly from Paris" who had been from time to time his "guests" scarcely had amused him for an hour, not one of them had interested him for a moment. But this woman of breeding and of character appealed to him, and af-

fected him strongly. To claim her as his, fascinated him. To have a woman companion and friend—perhaps that appealed to him most. He was lonely. And, perhaps unconsciously, he was homesick sometimes for things and conditions he'd left behind him in Europe. Interesting as it had been, his stay at Cambridge had not been all pleasant. He had been there, prince and rich and brilliant though he was, on tolerance, and that had been torment. But often here in his solitary, uncompanioned state, the Raja of Rukh was more than half homesick for the old varsity—its life, its human give-and-take, the town at its river-ribboned feet. For all his retinue the man was a "solitary"; he longed for a friend. He dared not leave Rukh now. He might lose Rukh, if he left it for long now. He had no mind to lose Rukh—it had been his fathers' for too long, it kept him too richly, *and* he loved it too well.

He prided himself that Europe had made a superficial but accomplished cosmopolitan of him—he knew that at core he was all Oriental still. But he was a little wrong there. The West had infused itself into him more than he dreamed. Cambridge had made something of a half-caste of the high-born, absolute ruler of Rukh—an intellectual half-caste. He had studied a few Western masters profoundly, he had dabbled, and he still dabbled, in abominably many. Your true cosmopolitan is born, not made. He is very rare. Europe had given Rukh's Raja Gogol and Herbert Spencer, Byron and Aristotle, Goethe and Ben Jonson and Macaulay, the philosophies of Greece and of England, the cultures of France and Spain, the flairs of Mayfair and Rome, but it had taken away more than it had given, had cramped even more than it had developed. It had not expatriated him, but it had made him lonely.

The European side, grafted on him, and still growing green and strong, the European in him, craved this exquisite and companionable English gentlewoman even more, and more insistently than the Asian did. He would win her in Eastern ways, if he must, but he would wear and keep her in Western ways, if she liked —and as far as one might in Rukh.

He *had* come to believe that the Superman of whom the new philosophers prated almost as glibly as intricately and obscurely, would be generated from some high fusion of East and West—a flabby, unwholesome belief, but he held it, and since he himself could not be world-eminent as the first Superman, he was keenly minded to beget him. But he had not forgotten La-swak. La-swak should have a rich heritage, a gilded and cushioned life, his other sons should be provided for nobly and carefully, and his daughters should be given in marriage, well-portioned, of course. As for his native wives, his new queen should do with them as she pleased. But La-swak should keep a princely place, always the favorite son; and Ak-kok should keep her place, her pleasure and her ease.

Rukh admired the English more than he disliked them. And, too, in the ordinary, human way, to which all flesh is heir he had fallen in love—with, as it chanced, a Western woman.

Abortive, fantastic a dream as ever opium gave, but it brightened his eyes, flushed his face, and set all his sensitive nerves dancing to delicate music.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE billiard balls clicked again.

They had not interrupted their game for her, then.

He had sat down at his writing-table when Mrs. Crespin had left him, and now he drew a pad to him, and picked up the pencil again. He began to write; he had found the words he wanted.

"Watkins!" he called, not loudly.

"Yessir?" Watkins had come at once.

The Raja tore the sheet off the pad, and handed it to him.

The valet read it aloud softly. He always read aloud to his master any message he was to transmit, to assure reading and sending it correctly. He read, "'The lady has come to terms. She will enter His Highness's household.' Quite so, sir," the man said. "What suite will she occupy?"

"My innocent Watkins!" Rukh said twittingly. "Do you think it's true? What have I to do with an unapproachable English woman? It's only a bait for the Feringhis. You shall send it out in their hearing, and if either of them can read the Morse code, the devil's in it if he doesn't give himself away."

"Beg pardon, sir," Watkins said, with an appreciative grin. "I didn't quite catch on."

"If they move an eyelash I'll take care they never see the inside of this room again," Rukh asserted. Watkins made no comment; he did not doubt it.

"Am I to send this to India, sir?" he asked.

"To anywhere or nowhere," Rukh told him cheerfully. "Reduce the current, so that no one can pick it up. So long as it's heard in this room, that's all I want."

"But when am I to send it, sir?" the man inquired not unreasonably.

"Listen," the Raja ordered. "I'll get them in here on the pretext of a little wireless demonstration, and then I'll tell you to send out an order to Tashkent for champagne. That'll be your cue. Go ahead—and send slowly."

"Shall I ask whether I'm to code it, sir?" Watkins was taking every precaution to do exactly as the Raja wished. It always was wisest—and safest also—to do that. But too the man was entering into the spirit of it now. He liked his job.

"You may as well," Rukh assented. "It'll give artistic finish to the thing."

"Very good, Your 'Ighness. But," he had more to ask, more to provide himself with precautions for, "afterwards, if, as you was saying, they was to try to corrupt me, sir—"

"Corrupt you?" The Raja held up a hand in horror. "That would be painting the lily with a vengeance."

Watkins was incensed. Even a cockney blackleg has his sensitiveness—but he did not dare show it, and only a touch of annoyance crept into his voice, as he questioned again, "Suppose they tries to get at me, sir—what are your instructions?"

"How do you mean?" The Raja understood perfectly what Watkins meant, but it often pleased him—it did now—to put the cockney to the trouble of putting things into words very plainly.

"Shall I let on to take the bait?" the valet explained.

"You may do exactly as you please," the master told him indifferently. "I have the most implicit confidence in you, Watkins."

"You are very good, sir," Watkins tried not to say it sulkily.

The Raja smiled. "I know that anything they can offer you would have to be paid either in England or in India, and that you daren't show your nose in either country," he remarked grimly. "You have a very comfortable job here—"

"My grateful thanks to you, sir," the man said humbly.

"And you don't want to give the hangman a job, either in Lahore or in London."

"The case in a nutshell, sir," Watkins said cheerfully. "But I thought if I was to pretend to send a message for them, it might keep them quiet-like."

"Very true, Watkins," the Raja approved. "It would not only keep them quiet, but the illusion of security would raise their spirits, which would be a humane action. I am always on the side of humanity."

"Just so, sir," the other replied dryly. "Then I'll humor them."

"Yes if they want to send a message," Rukh agreed. "If they try to 'get at,' not only you, but the instrument, call the guard," he stipulated, "and let me know at once."

"Certainly, sir," Watkins grinned.

"Now," Rukh added briskly, "open the door and stand by. You have the message?"

Watkins drew the slip of paper from his waistcoat pocket, and began to read it aloud, " 'The lady has come to terms. She'—"

"Yes, that's right," Rukh cut him off sharply.

"Oh, look here," he added, as the man was opening the folding door, "when you've finished, you'd better lock the door again, and say, 'Any orders, sir?' If I say, 'No orders, Watkins,' it'll mean I'm satisfied they don't understand. If I think they do understand, I'll give you what orders I think necessary."

"Very good, sir," the punctilious valet replied, as he softly threw back the folding doors that divided Rukh's snuggery and the wireless-room: a small, plain, business-like, office-looking place—the operator's seat in front of the apparatus of incredibly many instruments—and that was all—except an electric light in the ceiling, not lit now, of course. Not a wire showed on floor or wall—although all of "wireless" is done by means of wires!

The Raja rose and went to the door of the billiard-room, and when he had opened it said, "Oh, Major, you were saying you had no experience of wireless. If you've finished your game, it might amuse you to see it at work. Watkins is just going to send out a message. Would Mrs. Crespin care to come?"

"Yes," Crespin answered, coming into the snuggery, "why not? Will you come, Lucilla?" he called over his shoulder.

She and Traherne followed Crespin in, not very eagerly—all three wearily polite, but scarcely interested, unless their faces and walk belied them. Rukh eyed them closely, with eyes so agile that he managed to watch all three of them at once. They had no chance to exchange one covert glance, had they cared to—but they were playing their own hands too carefully and well for that—and they understood each other too thoroughly to need to do so. They looked a little bored. And they looked shockingly tired. The bright day was

near its high zenith now, and in its searching light they looked to Rukh to have aged perceptibly in the short time they had been in the billiard-room. He didn't wonder at it.

"This," he told them, pointing, "you see, is the apparatus. All ready, Watkins? Won't you sit down?" He gave Mrs. Crespin a chair, and indicated others to the men. "You have the order for Tashkent, Watkins?"

"Yes, Your 'Ighness," the valet said, producing the slip with the fake message on it, "but I haven't coded it."

"Oh, never mind," Rukh ordered impatiently. "Send it in clear. Even if some outsider does pick it up, I daresay we can order three cases of champagne without causing international complications."

Watkins put on his receivers, and sat down at the wireless set, with its many instruments in front of him, tapped the key, made an adjustment, and sat "listening in"—and waited.

"He's waiting for the reply signal," the Raja explained.

"Oh!" Crespin rejoined blankly. "May I take one of your excellent cigars, Raja?" he added with a better show of interest.

"By all means," Rukh told him. He watched Crespin's face and his hands as the Major lit the cigar. He credited both Traherne and Mrs. Crespin with enough finesse to cloak their thoughts and their emotions baffingly well, but he made very sure of trapping the Major's thoughts and emotions as they came. If Major Crespin knew anything at all of the wireless, Rukh made very sure that he would betray it, "chuck it" at him almost.

"I've got them," Watkins announced after a suitable pause, and proceeded to send his message, slowly, very clearly: *"The lady has come to terms,"* the Morse code spelled very deliberately. Dr. Traherne and Mrs. Crespin understood none of it; Antony Crespin read it as if it had been large, clear print.

"May we speak?" he said in a low voice, bending a little towards Rukh.

"Oh, yes," the Raja laughed; "you won't be heard in Tashkent."

"She will enter," the valet's fingers, and the disks on the wireless keyboard, spelled out carefully.

Crespin pulled his cigarette case out—what a stupid-looking face this Englishman had, the Raja thought. And he understood nothing of what the transmitter was saying—that was indubitable.

"His Highness's household."

Crespin held out the case to the doctor. "Have a cigarette, Traherne?"

"Thanks." Traherne took one. Major Crespin struck a match—Watkins was repeating the message—Crespin held the match, saying, "Let us smoke and drink, for to-morrow we—" and he blew out the match, for the cigarette drew now. And the re-transmission ended.

"That's how it's done!" Rukh announced.

"How many words did he send?" Traherne inquired, with a show of interest that palpably was a little forced.

"What was it, Watkins?" the Raja demanded. " 'Forward by to-morrow's caravan twelve cases champagne. Usual brand. Charge our account'—was that it?"

"That's right, sir," the man answered as he turned from the apparatus.

"Twelve words," Rukh told Traherne, checking his count on his fingers.

"And can they really make sense out of those fireworks?" Crespin demanded a little rudely, and almost incredulously. Your Englishman always is incredulous of what he does not understand.

"I hope so—else we shall run short of champagne," the Raja said with a laugh.

Traherne, blowing smoke-rings skilfully, knew that Rukh lied. A "show" run on such lines as this was would not get within but a few days' supply of champagne. Dr. Traherne had understood nothing of what the keys had clicked out, but he was sure that it was something very different from what the Raja had translated—if it had been anything at all, or had gone anywhere. Dr. Traherne understood Rukh better than Rukh understood Crespin.

Watkins came into the snuggery, locked the folding door carefully, tried it, pocketed his key-ring, and turned to his master. "Any orders, Your 'Ighness?" he asked.

"No orders, Watkins," the Raja told him lazily.

Major Antony Crespin had scored a point.

CHAPTER XXXVI

AS Watkins reached the door that led into the corridor, one of the Raja's soldiers met him, and spoke to him. Watkins nodded, and turned back.

"The 'Igh Priest is waiting to see Your 'Ighness," he announced.

"Oh," Rukh said in surprise, hesitated a minute, then added, "Oh, well, show him in."

Watkins passed into the corridor and came back almost at once, ushering in an ornate, sinister-faced figure. He must have been wearing not less than half a dozen coats or gowns, furred, beaded and embroidered. Some looked fairly new, several were faded, one was frankly patched. His hands were not over-clean, but they wore many rings. And he wore ear-rings, great hoops of gold with many small jewels hanging from them. His features were at once heavy and sharp, and his shrewd-looking, not unhandsome eyes held the uncanny smoldering fire of the true fanatic's. His lips were fat and violently red, his cheeks were high, his nose was beaked, and his eyebrows were heavily stained with henna.

The Raja greeted the decorative, if not to English eyes attractive, prelate briefly, but ceremoniously, and as Watkins disappeared, turned to his prisoners.

"I mentioned my Archbishop of York," he reminded them with a slight grimace. "This is he. Allow me to introduce you. Your Grace," he said in his best Mayfair manner—His Grace scowled hideously, "Mrs. Crespin—Major Crespin—Dr. Traherne."

The Priest appeared to understand the situation, for he paid the introduction the acknowledgment of a more than half contemptuous salaam. To be fair to him, Traherne and the Crespins acknowledged it in a manner scarcely more polished. Mrs. Crespin and the physician stared not admiringly, and Major Crespin irreverently muttered, "Well, I'm blowed!"

"The Archbishop's manners are not good," the Raja said with a sigh of regret, "but a holy man—a very saintly, spiritual man, believe me. You will excuse him. He regards you, I regret to say, as unclean creatures, whose very presence means pollution. He would be a mine of information for an anthropologist," he added with a laugh.

None of them made any reply.

Rukh turned to the scowling saint, and they exchanged a few words. Rukh turned again to the three. "His Grace reminds me," he told them suavely, "of some arrangements for to-morrow's ceremony which, as Archbishop of Canterbury, I must attend to in person. You will excuse me for half an hour? Pray make yourselves at home. Tiffin at half-past twelve," he added hospitably. Then he spoke again to the Priest, speaking rather peremptorily. The Priest replied with what may have been scholarly Rukh, but sounded a bitter growl. The Raja turned to Lucilla again, with a laughing, apologetic face. "His grace says *au revoir,*" he told them, "and so do I." He nodded to the two Englishmen, bowed gravely to Mrs. Crespin, and passed into the corridor, the Priest stalking behind him.

As the door closed, Crespin pulled his handkerchief from his cuff, and mopped his forehead—and he turned an eager, troubled look to the decanters. But

when his wife and Traherne were just about to speak, he motioned them imperatively to be cautious. Then he stole noiselessly to the billiard-room, went in and searched it. Convinced that no eavesdropper was hidden there, he came back into the snuggery, and closed the billiard-room door.

The others had taken their cue from him. Lucilla was examining the narrow balcony outside the window, Traherne had crept up to the door of the wireless room, and was testing noiselessly its fastening.

"What was the message?" Traherne asked as they drew together near the window—it was farthest from possible listeners.

Antony Crespin smiled. "It said," he answered, "that the lady had accepted her life—on his conditions."

"Oh! A trap for us!" was Traherne's comment.

"Yes," Crespin agreed. "A put-up job. And a clumsy one."

"You gave no sign, Antony." Lucilla laid her hand on her husband's arm as she spoke, more liking and respect in voice and eyes than she had given him for years, and his fingers closed over hers gratefully. "I think," she said, "he must have been reassured."

"Evidently," Traherne said, "or he wouldn't have left us here."

"What to do now?" Crespin asked briskly—in the tone of one who knew there was not much time to lose. He spoke to Traherne, but he kept his hand on his wife's, holding her hand close on his arm—and she let it stay.

"Can we break open the door?" Traherne answered.

"No good," Crespin told him. "It would make a

noise. We'd be interrupted, and then it *would* be all up."

Traherne nodded gloomily. "Well, then," he suggested desperately, "the next step is to try to bribe Watkins."

"Bribe your dead grandmother's parrot!" Crespin jibed.

And, "I don't believe it's a bit of good," Lucilla objected.

"Nor I," Traherne owned. "The fellow's a thorough-paced scoundrel. But we might succeed, and, if we don't even try, they'll suspect that we're plotting something else. If we can convince them that we're at our wits' end, we've the better chance of taking them off their guard."

"Yes," Lucilla urged quickly. "You see that, Antony."

He patted her hand. "Perhaps you're right," he told Traherne. "But, even if the damned scoundrel can be bought, what good is it, if I can't remember the wavelength to Amil-Serai?" He threw his wife's hand off unconsciously as he felt again for his handkerchief, and mopped at his troubled face. But Lucilla laid her hand again on his arm.

"You'll think of it all of a sudden," she told him.

"Not if I keep racking my brains for it," he groaned. "If I could get my mind off it, the damned thing might come back to me."

"Yes," Traherne agreed, "and that's all the more reason for action. But first, we must settle what message to send, if we get the chance."

"Yes—oh—yes," Mrs. Crespin said breathlessly, and she went hurriedly to the writing-table, and flung herself into Rukh's writing-chair. "Dictate!" she ordered.

"I'll write." She snatched an envelope, her fingers flew to a pen. Crespin bent over her shoulder, and pulled the ink nearer her hand.

"What about this?" Traherne suggested, after a moment: "'Major Crespin, wife, Traherne, imprisoned Rukh, Raja's palace; lives in danger,'" he dictated slowly, while Mrs. Crespin, writing it down feverishly, waited impatiently after each word for the next.

"We want something more definite," Crespin objected, when Traherne had finished.

Traherne considered. "Yes," he said thoughtfully, "you're right. We do."

"How would this do?" Mrs. Crespin asked, picking up her pen again: "'Death threatened to-morrow evening. Rescue urgent.'"

"Excellent!" Dr. Traherne exclaimed.

She wrote again, and when she held the envelope up to him, Crespin took it, and read aloud slowly, "'Major Crespin, wife, Traherne, imprisoned, Rukh, Raja's palace. Death threatened to-morrow evening. Rescue urgent.' Right. I'll keep it ready," he said as he carefully pocketed it.

"Now," Traherne demanded, "how to get hold of Watkins?"

Lucilla still sat in the swivel-chair—leaning back in it wearily, her eyes half closed, when she had finished writing. She roused herself now, and glanced about. "There's a bell here," she said suddenly, seeing it on the writing table. "Shall I try it?" and she put her hand over it.

But Traherne stopped her. "Hold on a moment," he said quickly. "We have to decide what to do, if he won't take money, and we have to use force in order to get his keys."

"By Jove, yes!" Crespin agreed. "And there's nothing here to knock him on the head with," he added disgustedly, as he looked eagerly about the room; "not even a chair you can lift—"

"Not a curtain cord to truss him up with—" Traherne added desperately, too searching the room.

"The first thing would be to gag him, wouldn't it?" Lucilla asked, rising. "Would this do for that?" She pulled the long, heavy silk scarf from her shoulders, and held it out.

"Capital!" Traherne said, taking it and trying its strength. "Capital." He tied a knot in it strongly, tested it again, and carried it to the couch, and laid it on the end near the wireless-room door. "See?" he asked.

Both nodded.

"What about a billiard cue?" Crespin suggested next.

But Dr. Traherne shook his head. "If he saw it about, he'd smell a rat," he objected.

"Then," Major Crespin muttered grimly, "there's only one thing—"

"What?" Traherne asked him.

Major Crespin pointed to the balcony outside the wide open window. Lucilla was standing near it.

"Oh!" she choked, and shrank away from the open window, trembling violently.

"I'm afraid it can't be helped," Traherne told her, saying it not too regretfully, perhaps. And he added approvingly, "There's a drop of a good hundred feet."

"None too much for him," Crespin snapped between his teeth.

"When he locked that door," Traherne reminded him, "he put the key in his trousers pocket. We must

remember to get it before—" He broke off, because a woman was listening, but his eyes spoke—they spoke short shrift for Watkins, the valet.

"But," Mrs. Crespin broke in, "if you kill him, and still don't remember the call, we shall be no better off than we are now."

"We shall be no worse off," Traherne said grimly.

"Better, by Jove!" Crespin exclaimed. "For, if I can get three minutes at that instrument, the Raja can't tell whether we have communicated or not." He ended with a short exultant laugh, and strode to the revolving book-shelves where the glassful of liquor he'd poured out still stood. He took it up, with a sort of animal sob.

"Oh, Antony!" Lucilla cried.

Traherne held out a hand to beg her silence. The physician *knew.*

"Don't be a fool, Lu," Crespin said roughly.

"The soda's all flat," she said weakly.

"The soda be damned!" Antony Crespin swore. "It's not the soda I want. And I put damned little soda in it."

"Antony!" she sobbed.

"Don't be a fool, Lu," he repeated contemptuously, and gulped down the drink, and refilled the glass with raw whiskey right up to the brim. "It's because I am so unnaturally sober that my brain won't work!" He drank down the raw whiskey. "God!" he cried, as he set the glass down. "Now ring that bell!" he commanded. Alcohol was doing its medicinal work—this once at least. Antony Crespin was his own man again. Valor raced through his veins. Resource tingled in nerves and brain. His eyes glittered red. Command rang in his voice. "Ring that bell, I say."

His wife moved to the table, and obeyed him.

Dr. Traherne stood silent, looking on approvingly, admiringly too—at Crespin. And also he was diagnosing—the friend lost in the physician. Crespin had been wise in his cups for once, he thought.

"You do the talking, Traherne," Major Crespin commanded when his wife had rung. "That fellow's damned insolence gets on my nerves."

"All right," Traherne replied quietly, taking the chair by the writing-table that Mrs. Crespin had left.

Lucilla turned away and leaned her head on the mantel wearily.

"Look out—" Crespin warned them, and strolled towards the window—a red gleam in his eyes, as Watkins came in.

"You rang, sir?" Watkins said impartially to the two men; standing at the door.

"Yes, Watkins," Dr. Traherne answered him; "we want a few words with you. Do you mind coming over here? We don't want to speak loud."

"There's no one but us understands English, sir," the valet reminded him.

"Please oblige me, all the same," Traherne insisted.

The man did as he was asked. "Now, sir!" he said, almost standing at attention at the writing-table. And Crespin saw it, and smiled.

"I dare say you can guess what we want with you," Traherne began.

"I'm no 'and at guessin', sir," Watkins said densely. "I'd rather you'd put it plain."

"Well," the doctor rejoined, "you know we've fallen into the hands of bloodthirsty savages? You know what is proposed for to-morrow?"

"I've 'eard as your numbers is up," the cockney said with insolent suavity.

"You surely don't intend to stand by and see us murdered?" Traherne looked at him hard as he spoke. "Three of your own people, and one of them a lady?"

"My own people, is it?" Watkins said with a mean, sleek smile. "And a lady—!"

But Dr. Traherne kept his temper. "A woman then, Watkins," he amended quietly.

"What has my own people ever done for me?" the valet sneered. "Or women either—that I should lose a cushy job, and risk my neck for the sake of the three of you? I wouldn't do it for all of your bloomin' England, I tell you straight."

"It's no good, Traherne," Major Crespin warned from the window. "Come down to tin tacks."

"Only a sighting shot, Major," Traherne explained. "It was just possible we might have misread our man."

"You did," Watkins broke in passionately, "if you took 'im for a V.C. 'ero wot 'ud lay down his life for England, 'ome and beauty. The first thing England ever done for me was to 'ave me sent to a reformatory for pinching a silver rattle off a young h'aristocrat in a p'rambulator. That, and the likes of that, is wot I've got to thank England for. And why did I do it? Because my mother would have bashed my face in, if I'd have come back empty-handed. That's wot 'ome and beauty has meant for me. W'y should I care more for a woman being scragged than what I do for a man?" Foul words, foully spoken, but the passion that hissed through them was real, and so was the sense of outrage. Watkins had his reasons. Most of us have.

"Ah, yes, I quite see your point of view." Dr. Traherne dismissed it with that. "But the question now is: What'll you take to get us out of this?"

Watkins sniggered offensively. Men have been killed for less. "Get you out of this!" he laughed truculently. "If you was to offer me millions, 'ow could I do that?"

Traherne told him. "By going into that room and sending this message through to the Amil-Serai aerodrome," he snapped. And Major Crespin crossed the room, and held out the message.

Watkins took it gingerly, read it through with slow ferret eyes, but an expressionless face, and laid it down deliberately on the writing-table. "So that's the game, is it?" he commented with a shrug.

"That, as you say, is the game," Traherne told him tersely.

"You know what you're riskin'?" Watkins asked significantly.

"What do you mean?" Traherne demanded.

"W'y," Watkins replied, "if the Guv-nor suspected as you'd got a word through to India, ten to one he'd wipe you off the slate like that"—he snapped his loose fingers impertinently near Dr. Traherne's face—"like that without waiting for to-morrow."

"That makes no difference," Major Crespin said firmly. "We've got to face it."

"Come now!" Traherne argued. "On your own showing, Mr. Watkins, loyalty to your master oughtn't to stand in your way. I don't suppose gratitude is one of your weaknesses."

"Gratitude! To 'im?" the man cried hotly. "What for? I'm not badly off here, to be sure, but it's nothing to wot I does for 'im; and I 'ate 'im for 'is funny little ways. D'you think I don't see that he's always pulling

my leg?" There was something human in Watkins, after all—and something English left in him too.

"Well, then," Traherne said quickly, "you won't mind selling him. We've only to settle the price."

"That's all very fine, sir," the valet said with an unpleasant grin, "but what price 'ave you gents to offer?"

"Nothing down," Traherne admitted, "no spot cash—that's clear. You'll have to take our word for whatever bargain we come to."

"Your word!" Watkins flouted him. "How do I know—?"

"Oh, our written word," Traherne said, quite unruffled. "We'll give it to you in writing."

Watkins made no reply. He was thinking it out—and he took his time. He had plenty of time. He knit his brows, and twisted his fingers.

For them—their yet lease of life to be counted, perhaps, in hours, and sick heart-beats now—waiting to know if he'd take their bait—the tension was almost too much. The woman lifted her head from the mantel, turned with her back to the fireplace, and with her hands nervously clasped, stood watching and listening. Her face was gray. Crespin crossed to beside her, and though she gave no sign, she was glad that he had. Dr. Traherne stood alert and outwardly patient. But he knew that his nerves were cracking, and his collar was cutting his neck. Crespin's eyes were glazed with fear now, Traherne's pinched and sharpened with it—but their *fear* was for the woman.

At last Watkins spoke. "If I was to 'elp you out," he said very slowly, "there must be no more fairy-tales about any of you 'avin' seen me in India." He shuffled one foot as he said it, and a dull red light came in his shifty eyes.

"All right," Dr. Traherne said promptly. "We accept your assurance that you never were there."

But apparently Watkins was not satisfied yet, not ready to talk money terms. He wanted more first. If Watkins was playing a deep game with them, he was playing it skilfully, and scientifically too, the physician thought, as the valet continued:

"And see here, Dr. Traherne—you know very well I couldn't stay here after I'd helped you to escape—leastways, if I stayed, it'd be in my grave. You'll 'ave to take me with you—and for that I can only have your word. Supposing you could get the message through, and the English was to come, no writing could bind you, if you chose to leave me in the lurch."

"Quite true." Traherne had to admit it. "I'm afraid you'll have to trust us for that. But I give you my word of honor that we would be as careful of your safety as if you were one of ourselves—"

"Quite a 'appy family," the man murmured insolently. But Traherne—he had himself well in hand, though it was costing him much—took no notice. "I suppose you know," he concluded gravely, "that, strange as you may think it, there are people in the world that would rather die than break a solemn promise."

"Even to a hound like you, Watkins," Major Crespin added. Crespin's patience was tattered—his fingers itched.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IT was unwisely said. Traherne signaled an "Easy-all" with his eyes and brows, Lucilla laid her hand on Crespin's.

Watkins flung round on him viciously. "I advise you to keep a civil tongue in yer 'ead, Major," he snarled roughly. "Don't forget that I 'ave you in the 'ollow of my 'and."

"True, Watkins," Traherne said quickly, "and the hollow of your hand is a very disagreeable place to be in." He said it flatteringly—and Watkins took it so, and grinned again. "That's why we're willing to pay well to get out of it. Come, now, what shall we say?"

"Well, what about a little first instalment?" the cockney insinuated oilily. "You ain't quite on your uppers, are you, now? You could come down with something, be it ever so humble?"

Dr. Traherne pulled out his pocketbook instantly, and counted his notes. "I have three hundred rupees and five ten-pound notes," he said, laying them on the table.

Watkins sniffed. Then he turned to Crespin.

"And you, Major?" he demanded, brusquely.

Crespin already had counted his store. This was no time to haggle. He indulged his right leg, and himself, in a slight kicking motion, and then went to the table, and tossed his money down with Traherne's. "Two hundred and fifty rupees," he said; "oh, and some loose change."

"Oh, never mind the chicken-feed!" Watkins said

grandly. "And the lady?" he turned and eyed her as he spoke.

"I gave my last rupee to your wife, Watkins," Mrs. Crespin replied.

Watkins nodded condescendingly. "Well," he said consideringly, "that's about a hundred and twenty to go on with."

"There," Traherne told him, placing a hand on the heap of notes, "that's your first instalment." Watkins eyed it haughtily. "Now, what about the balance? Shall we say a thousand pounds apiece?"

"A thousand apiece!" Watkins cried. "Three thousand pounds! You're joking, Dr. Traherne! Wot would three thousand pounds be to me in England! W'y, I'd 'ave to take to valeting again. No, no, sir! If I'm to do this job, I must 'ave enough to make a gentleman of me." He said it perfectly gravely. He meant it.

They stared at him in blank amazement. Then, almost in unison they broke into irrepressible laughter. In peril of their lives, on terrible tenterhooks of sickening suspense, they laughed wildly—a hysterical outlet for pent-up emotions very different, it was in part, but too it was pure appreciation of the funniest thing they ever had heard. Antony Crespin shook with laughter, and swayed from side to side. Traherne tittered. The quick note of Lucilla's mirth rang through the room like a delicate, musical bell.

Watkins was greatly offended—but too he was a little puzzled. "Well," he said with a contemptuous scowl—no use showing too much "huff," he reflected, for he intended to pocket that three hundred and twenty, and Crespin and Traherne were against him two to one—"you are the queerest lot as ever I come

across. Your lives is 'anging by a 'air, and yet you can larf!"

"It's your own fault, Watkins," Lucilla Crespin gurgled, completely hysterical now. "Why will you be so funny?" A screaming note sharpened her laugh, and she broke into tears, and huddling down on the couch she buried her face on it, her body shaken with sobs.

Traherne got back to business. They were wasting too much time, he told himself sternly.

"I'm afraid what you ask is beyond our means, Watkins," he said—careful not to say it too significantly—"But I double my bid—two thousand apiece."

"You'll 'ave to double it again, sir, and a little more," Watkins said smugly. "You write me out an I.O.U. for fifteen thousand pounds, and I'll see wot can be done."

"Well," Crespin blurted angrily, "you are the most consummate—"

Watkins interrupted him insolently. "If your lives ain't worth five thousand apiece to you," he said contemptuously, "there's nothing doing. For my place here is worth fifteen thousand to me. And there's all the risk too—I'm not charging you nothing for that."

"We appreciate your generosity, Watkins," Dr. Traherne stated. "Fifteen thousand be it!" The suspense must be cut! Time pressed hideously. Human nerves knew a limit. And after all—

"Now you're talking," Watkins remarked patronizingly.

With no more waste of words or of look, Basil Traherne bent over the table, and wrote and signed. He handed the I.O.U. to Watkins. Watkins scrutinized it, and threw it down on the writing-table. "That's right,

sir," he said briskly, "but the Major must sign it too."

Antony Crespin said something brief but terrible under his breath as he went to the writing table. But he signed it at once, not troubling to read, and threw down the pen. "There you are, damn you!" he told Watkins with a jerk of his head.

Watkins bowed.

"Now," Traherne insisted, "get to work quick, and call up Amil-Serai—"

"Right you are, sir," the man replied nonchalantly, and when he had pocketed the I.O.U. he strolled over to the wireless-room and began in a leisurely way to unlock the door.

"Isn't there some special call you must send out to get Amil-Serai?" Crespin asked him.

"Oh, yes, sir, I know it," Watkins said—his tone was respectful enough, his smile was not. He threw the folding-doors quite open, maddeningly deliberate in all he did, went in and took his seat at the wireless instrument, picked up the "receivers," put it on his head, adjusted it, and began to tap-tap the wireless keys.

Crespin whispered to Dr. Traherne sharply: "That's not a service call!"

But neither of them had at all confidently expected it would be, and Traherne merely nodded grimly.

There was a pause. The room ached with the silence—it was so intense—the three waiting there so wrought, so desperate, determined.

Watkins, in the wireless room, sat "listening in," his cat-like head bent over the instruments, his face smooth and blank.

"Right!" he said suddenly. "Got them, sir. Now the message."

He began to work the key, and as it fell at his fingers' tips, Crespin spelt out to Traherne slowly, softly, word by word the message Watkins was sending. "'The—white—goats—are—ready—for—' No, but the black sheep is! Come on!"

Traherne did, almost before the two words were out. Without one shimmer of sound they moved. As they passed her, Lucilla Crespin, with a death-like, quivering face, but a hand that never trembled, held out her scarf. Traherne took it—he already held his own handkerchief ready. The woman pressed her hand to her mouth, to prison in the scream that was choking her.

Watkins wired methodically on.

Close behind him stole the two men—and death.

They swooped upon him without so much as noising the air.

Traherne jabbed the gag in. They tied the scarf—tight—mercilessly tighter—still tighter. He lurched. He tried to squirm. He was powerless—helpless. He attempted to cry—it trailed off into a strangled gurgle. That gurgle was Watkins' death-rattle. He caught at the edge of the wireless set, clutching it so desperately that blood clotted and purpled under his well-kept finger-nails. Crespin wrenched his hands away, twisted his arms behind him, tied the wrists with his strong, silk handkerchief. They made the gag fast. They tightened it more. They pinioned him well. They pinioned him not too kindly. They swung him up in their knotted arms—Traherne's face writhed. Crespin was smiling. He struggled desperately. But *Watkins knew.* They carried him out of the wireless-room. He'd never listen-in again. He had sent his last message. He was off for the Last Orderly Room. Lucilla Crespin sobbed as they passed her,

sobbed and clung to the mantelpiece. They reached the window. His head fell back, hanging from his limp neck like some hideous, distorted, unclean growth. Over the cruel, swathing gag she saw his tortured pig-like eyes strain. She turned away.

For a moment they rested on the balustrade.

"Must we—?" Traherne said huskily.

"Nothing else for it"—Crespin almost chuckled—"one, two, three!"

They lifted. They threw.

Compelled, against her will, Lucilla Crespin had followed them—stood watching, petrified. "One, two,—three!" She gave a gasping, shuddering, sick cry. "One—two—three!" Watkins, the Londoner—once of the Dorsets—had reached the Orderly Room—a mass of mangled pulp, down there in the Orderly Room, a sheer drop of a hundred feet long, he lay facing His Colonel.

They turned away from the balcony—they stumbled back into the room, Traherne like a drunken man, Crespin erect and soldierly. He crossed the room with a springy, soldier's tread, and poured out a glass of whiskey.

"At least," he said quietly, as he lifted it to his lips, "we haven't taken it lying down." He bent his mouth to the liquor—then—he put the untouched glass down with a cry of intense excitement. "Hold on! Don't speak!" They kept the silence they dared not break. His eyes flamed, and leapt. "I have it!" he cried. . . . "Yes, by God, I have it! I've remembered the call!"

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHISKEY had done its medicinal work. Alcohol had wrought its miracle. It had paid something more off the long score it owed Antony Crespin.

Dr. Traherne knew it.

"Can you lock that door?" the soldier demanded, pointing towards the corridor.

His wife ran to it breathlessly. "No key this side!" she told him hoarsely.

Traherne went to it quickly. "Don't open it," he whispered. "There are soldiers in the passage. I'll hold it." He put his back against the door—and stood rock-like before it.

Major Crespin strode to the wireless instruments, and flung himself down in the chair worn a little from the often sitting of what lay down below the balcony, in the chair still warm from the human heat of living Watkins.

Major Crespin took no thought of that. He was examining the instruments. He examined them rapidly.

"The scoundrel had reduced the current," he exclaimed, making an adjustment with feverish haste, but steady, expert fingers. "Now the wave-length!" He still was adjusting. He caught up the receivers, and clapped them on—they too still a little warm from Watkins' ears. Then he began to transmit, sending their desperate cry for help out into the alien spaces of air—their grand hailing cry of distress—over the Himalayas to a British-held station. Traherne at the door, alert for the slightest movement outside it, Lucilla

breathless, drawn-eyed, watched him breathlessly. They were openly nervous and anxious, tormented, but Crespin worked calmly on, expert and confident, braced by the liquor he'd gulped, doubly braced and better that he was doing something, and knew that he was able to do something—something that might, by God's own mercy, and England's own good luck, avail them, and succor.

He ended the first sending, and sat listening in quietly, while their breath came in painful pants; Traherne's hands knotted convulsively, the agony-lines in the woman's face cutting its loveliness deeper, slashing furrow and sags of age on her youth.

"Do you get any answer?" Traherne whispered across the room, impatience cracking through the leash of his prudence.

"No," Crespin replied cheerfully, over his shoulder. "No; I don't expect any. It was scarcely worth listening-in—I'm sure they haven't the power. But it's an even chance that I get them all the same. I'll repeat now—if I get the time." Again the sure, dexterous fingers rushed over the key. Once more their life-or-death call hurtled out into the almost chartless ocean of atmosphere over the mountains of Rukh, calling, "For our blood's sake, and the flag's, come save us."

"Some one's coming up the passage!" Dr. Traherne whispered sharply. "Go on! Go on! I'll *hold* the door."

"Come and be damned!" Antony Crespin said. And the subtle fingers went gayly, carefully, very rapidly on.

Suddenly Traherne braced himself against the door, gripping its handle till his knuckles showed white and sharp through the strained, tanned skin. In another moment a sharp word of command was given outside,

and the rasping sound came in of shoulders heaved against the man-held door. Traherne put all his strength, all his will, to the stand he made, but gradually the door gave to the greater strength outside, and slowly but surely three of Rukh's guards pushed it open, and half tumbled into the room, almost thrown down by the force of their own exertion. And Traherne, drenched in his sweat—it dripped from him—was shoved by the push of the opening door, till he stood, trembling, but not untriumphant, not far from Mrs. Crespin.

Crespin went on transmitting—thought better of it—and pretended to be finding some wave-length, careful that it should not be that to Amil-Serai.

The corridor was a Babel. Hurried steps and guttural oaths, shrill questions, hot commands choked and packed it.

Rukh came in quickly—it had not taken him long to come—an inscrutable smile on his tan face, a murderous twinkle in his quickened eyes. He grasped the situation instantly—lifted his eyebrows amusedly, keenly surprised even in the moment's imperative rush—he knew he had no time to waste—to see not Traherne but Crespin at the instruments.

"Ah!" he exclaimed lightly. "When the cat's away—" He laughed delicately as he whipped out a revolver, and instantly fired.

He had aimed well. His eyes, wrist and fingers had been as steady and cool as quick.

"Got me, by God!" Major Crespin exclaimed with a stolid grunt, as he crumpled up, fell forward over the instrument. But he recovered himself immediately, making the last great effort of his ebbing life, its supreme effort perhaps, and, with a lightning-like rapid-

ity, that seemed more of intense living than of dying, unmade the instruments' adjustment. Then with a tormented laugh, a ghastly sound, he pulled himself up, groped with hands, eyes, sagging head, staggered back from the wireless set and lurched into the arms that caught him and held him, Lucilla, his wife's, and Basil Traherne's, while Rukh, smiling impassively, stood and watched them—and the guard, crowding the snuggery now—watched their Raja and waited his command.

They got the dying man to the couch, half dragging, half carrying him there—he could not move—and as they passed him, the Raja drew courteously back from their way.

They laid him down—very carefully. And he smiled at them as he groaned.

Traherne looked up, as he knelt holding him still, and ordered, "Brandy!"

Lucilla went to the tantalus, filled a glass, and brought it back; she held it towards Traherne, then drew it back, half-knelt, half-sat on the couch where her husband lay; and it was she who held his last glass to Antony Crespin's gray, stiffening lips.

The Raja turned away quietly, and left them, motioning the guards back to the corridor door. He himself strolled slowly to the wireless table, saw the draft message, written in a woman's hand, still lying there, took it up and read it.

"Antony!" the wife sobbed.

He smiled—and a man's love lit his filming eyes. Then they sought Traherne's. They gave each other a long, level look.

"Carry on!" Crespin said. Traherne nodded, tried to speak, choked, then mastering himself with difficulty, muttered brokenly, "Well played, sir."

The death-rattle sounded, the hand Lucilla held was more lifeless and colder, but it gripped hers yet. "Give my love," he whispered her, "to"—the rattle again—"the kiddies. Lu—will you"—again!—"kiss them—for me?" She nodded. She could not speak. "Lu—Lu—Lu—" his voice trailed off, and died in his rattling throat.

Rukh stood in the folding-door's opening and held out towards Crespin the paper on which their message was written. "How much of this did you get through?" he asked in a clear, vibrant voice.

"Too late; he'll not speak again," Dr. Traherne thought. "You'll get nothing from—that"—for the form they held was cold and still.

But the physician was wrong. It quivered once more—the cold thing they held—the ice-like hand clung once more to the woman's fingers—Major Crespin raised himself a little, something very human, alive, hate and baffled defeat, gleamed through his dead eyes.

"Damn you"—he said clearly and bitterly—acknowledging defeat—"damn you—none!"

Antony Crespin had gone. His corpse slithered back in their arms.

"Antony!"

But she knew that he would not answer her again.

She drew his head to her breast—and Traherne rose, and left them together.

"All over, eh?" Rukh asked him quietly.

Dr. Traherne nodded.

A rougher noise muffled the woman's quiet sobbing. Native soldiers burst through the corridor door, and rushed pell-mell to the Raja. One spoke to him wildly, two, not waiting the order, rushed on Traherne.

The man that had spoken, pointed to the open

window. The Raja went to it calmly, and looked out over the narrow balcony, and strolled back till he stood facing Traherne but a few feet away.

"Tut, tut—most inconvenient," he remarked languidly, not ill-naturedly. "And foolish on your part—for now, if my brothers should be reprieved, we cannot hear of it. What a pity—for you, perhaps. Otherwise—" he shrugged slightly—"the situation remains unchanged. We adhere to our program for to-morrow. The Major has only a few hours' start of you." And he turned on his heel, and passed out through the billiard-room, motioning something to the soldiers standing nearest Traherne.

When Lucilla Crespin looked up—it was not for some time—she was alone in the room with—her husband.

CHAPTER XXXIX

"I REGRET that I must offer you the services of a less well-trained ayah," Rukh said, "but it is unavoidable. The woman who has waited on you had the bad taste to be greatly attached to her little—and, I must own, not one would think personally attractive—cockney husband. She is—just for the time being, of course—inconsolable. And her noisy grief—she's of that irritating type—would disturb you. And too—she has learned—I regret it; but no autocrat can muzzle gossip, and such chatter flies in Rukh, and particularly fast in every palace, I think—she has learned how the inestimable, if sometimes indirect, Watkins came by his death. I could force her to attend you, but even I could not force or persuade her to do it civilly."

Mrs. Crespin made no reply.

She sat on a wide stone bench, soft with cushions and fringed breadths of silks, in the garden that snuggled radiantly below the corridor windows—and the Raja of Rukh stood before her, his face to the palace towards which the carved bench was backed.

He had sent old Ak-kok to bring the English lady there from the snuggery, and Ak-kok had obeyed him sulkily, but had obeyed. Soldiers had gone with her to see that she did, and the old nurse had known from Rukh's manner, even more than from his words, that in this she dare not disobey him. There were times and moods in which her prince humored and obeyed her. This was none. And when the soldiers had lifted

the dead man's body from where it lay, and carried it —not disrespectfully—away, and had indicated by unmistakable gestures that she might not follow them, Lucilla Crespin had turned listlessly and gone with Akkok. Why not? Nothing mattered now. There was no fret over little things left in her—the time was too short.

And so she sat on the bench to which the old Rukh woman took her, then turned and left her. And presently when they brought her food—men in the Raja's white and gold and green liveries—and put it down near her, she ate and drank, because she wished to be strong to-morrow: strong to die quietly and proudly, if no help came, strong to live to reach her children—hers and Antony's—if help from Amil-Serai swooped down on imprisoning Rukh. The men servants left her as soon as they'd served her, but a girl, evidently of the ayah class, stood near, as if in her service, her hands folded in her sari, her eyes, Lucilla thought, not fanatically inimical.

The Englishwoman was glad to be free of the palace walls—for a time; glad to sit here where she could not see it. She did not know that Rukh himself had moved the heavy seat so that its back was turned to the fortress-palace. And she was glad to know that all those thick walls stood impenetrable between her and what lay—it still must, she thought, the drop down had been so far and so sheer—in the gorge below the snuggery balcony. And of that too the Raja had thought.

She did not see the garden in which she sat, but perhaps some balm of its beauty and quiet stole to her and laved her.

It was of no great size, though its twisted length was not inconsiderable, for its possible fertile perch beside

the high-rock-placed palace was narrow. But it lay a very beautiful ribbon of blooms and fragrant shrubs, of exquisite vistas and lilied tanks at the edge of the fortress. A moat, more ornament than of possible need or use, was cut in the other side, and over the moat and its shimmering water a bridge—not drawn now—was perhaps the most beautiful bridge in Asia—a bridge of writhing, coiling snakes, carved stone and malachite cunningly—and at what human labor!—intertwisted and twined. And beyond the moat, down on the brown rocks' narrow perches lay the tiny dung-thatched homes of the peasants of Rukh. And the garden was pungent with hot, mingled sweetness.

The sun was setting. To-morrow at sunset! She lifted her hand to her neck and felt it curiously. At this hour to-morrow—she shuddered. Shame! she cried on herself. Englishwomen had died, suffering worse than death before they died. She was going to her death undefiled. She thanked her father's God for that! And as she threw back her head with a little lift of English pride, she saw the hills beyond the garden. It was good to see the mountains so—the great white-topped mountains. She lifted her eyes to them hungrily, and asked that from them her help might come—help to live, help to home and babies, or help to die. Over beyond the hills, back of the great snow piles lay Pahari. Ronny and Iris were there. She'd go to them, not here in this prison-place, but out in God's own open, she'd *be* with them, she'd spend such hours as were left her now with them.

Mother-love, and the anguish-push—her will, made it an almost omnipotent thing, wrought its incalculable miracle. She *was* with her children. She relived with them their little lives. She played with them. She

folded her arms about them. She gave her breasts to their baby lips. She was not grieving now—the hours were too few—she was joying in her boy and in Iris. And her face grew younger again, and softened.

And Rukh, coming noiselessly to her, standing and watching her, unseen by her, wondered at what he saw in her altered face—youth, peace, content. He had changed again, but the clothes he wore now still were European.

Even when he spoke at last, though she turned quiet eyes up to his, she paid no heed, and he thought did not hear.

She made no attempt to go. She showed no resentment of his presence. He would have preferred either to the blank she gave—or rather the blank he found. She gave nothing.

He tried her in several ways. She made no response—gave no sign.

He bit his lip, and waited.

At last he beckoned the serving woman, and sent her away to execute a command. While she was gone he told Mrs. Crespin that he had substituted the girl's service of her—the best he now had to offer her—for that of the woman who had attended her till now, and added his regret and his explanation.

Mrs. Crespin made no comment.

He spoke of Dr. Traherne. She made no reply.

He spoke of Antony Crespin.

She gave no sign.

But when the young ayah came back, and offered a shawl, an exquisite, delicate thing that Lucilla Crespin had not seen before, she made a slight gesture of refusal, and said, rising, "I will go to my room now, if I may."

"Your wish is my law," Rukh told her quietly.

She smiled faintly at that.

"One moment," he begged as she turned.

She did not turn back, but she paused, and waited.

"You will dine—" he asked; "you—perhaps"—his voice almost was humble—"will prefer to dine alone?"

"Yes," she said, and gesturing the ayah to show her the way, went slowly and calmly back to the palace door.

And for her proud, still courage, he maddened for her anew. He disliked while he feared and admired her people, he despised her creed—as indeed he did all creeds and beliefs, though deep in his blood something both love and reverence of the Buddha held and was quick—but he desired her fiercely as a collector desires the one rare and priceless specimen his cabinets lack. He wanted to *own her,* but, more than that, he longed to gain from her some personal response to the very personal feeling towards her, the kindling inclination that tingled and throbbed his being.

The sun had quite gone when he too left the garden, only the white sheen of the far, high mountains lighting it—for the stars had not come yet.

At the sound of a foot, he sprang up from the bench. It was not the fall of a native foot, he knew, and it was a woman's tread.

She was threading her way back through the garden —the ayah stood quietly waiting at the side-door of the palace-wall. He had ordered strictly that no one should oppose the Ferenghi lady in aught, save her passing from the palace precincts, but he wondered how she had found her way back through the long, twisting palace labyrinths—no one whose tongue she knew, no one who knew hers.

She was gathering flowers—one here, one there, selecting them carefully, and when she had chosen a few, she moved quietly on until she reached him. He had thought she had not seen him, but she must have done so, for her joining of him was deliberate.

She spoke first.

"May I," she asked quietly, "see my husband?"

"Is it necessary?" Rukh asked.

"I wish it," she told him gently.

"Why?" he demanded. "You did not love him!"

"I did—" she said, looking him in the eyes.

It was lighter now. The first stars were hanging out their lamps of green and blue, and the moon was cresting the horizon lustily.

"How long ago?" the Raja asked.

"May I see Major Crespin?" she repeated.

"To place those flowers in his hands? They are Rukh-grown you know!"

"For his children," she said.

"As you wish," the Raja told her—after a pause. The Raja of Rukh was not unmoved. A warm heart beats always under the Oriental mask. Antony Crespin's widow, there in her peril and loneliness, in his garden, the blossoms she'd filched from it in her hand, had reached it. He desired her. He intended to take her. But his manhood was stirred.

"To-night—it is growing late—or in the morning, Mrs. Crespin?" he asked her softly.

"Now," she replied.

"As you wish," he repeated.

"Thank you," Mrs. Crespin told him.

But for his turban, he still wore European clothes. But his inseparable silver whistle hung at the coat of his gray lounge suit. He lifted the whistle. But she

stayed him a moment, and said, "Will you tell me—what—will be done—with Major Crespin's body?"

"I had not thought of that yet," Rukh asserted. It was true. "But no disrespect shall be shown to what the flowers you have gathered protects."

"May my husband's body be burned?" she asked.

"You prefer it—to burial?"

"Much."

Rukh's dark eyes darkened. She preferred it to burial here in Rukh, he knew. But after an instant's hesitation, he said quietly: "It shall be done. I promise you."

"Thank you," she said again, "I will go to him now."

The Raja bowed, and lifted the silver whistle. Its long note pierced sharp and sweet through the evening.

"They will attend you," he said when he'd given the soldiers who'd come a crisp order. And she turned and went with the men, the young ayah close behind her as they entered the door in the palace wall.

Rukh made no attempt to follow.

He stood and watched her. And when she had gone, he went a few steps, bent, and took up a flower she had dropped, and he drew its stem through the buttonhole of his gray lounge coat. It was a pale pink tea-rose, and its scent was strong and sweet.

CHAPTER XL

FEW slept in Rukh that night. Over every mountain path eager peasants came from outlying hamlets and solitary, scattered huts. The horn lanterns they swung as they walked, swarmed the hill-ways like fireflies.

The place of sacrifices was burnished and garnished by the light of great flaring torches that temple girls, stripped to their slim, brown waists, held up, while the priests chattered and chanted, shifting dirt heaps into less conspicuous coigns, dusting the rough-hewn carvings, oiling and sharpening a knife, taking dead garlands down, putting fresher garlands up—bringing the blood-bowls out of the rock-crevice cupboards, shaking vestments out of their creases. The whole great place reeked of marigolds, cocoanut oil and resined torches. To-morrow it would reek of human blood. Yazok rubbed his hips itchingly, and he licked his lips, as he spat in a blood-bowl and rubbed it with a dirty oil-soaked rag till it shone anew.

In every hut-home preparations were making—festival garments being mended and shaken, flowers and feathers and tufts of fur woven into long necklaces, bracelets, anklets and head bands. Nuts and seeds were roasted and chewed, the lewd love songs of the amorous gods were sung by men and maidens, old crones and toddling baby-nakeds.

The palace teemed and throbbed. Servants with rapt, exalted faces moved about on tireless feet.

Priests and soldiers crowded corridor and stairs. Savory smells belched up from the kitchens—children, in soft skin sandals, their plump groins and their slim ones swathed in gold, white and green, carried fruit-heaped trays in slim young arms, and on sure-poised heads, from store-rooms to pantries. Musicians cleaned and tuned and fresh-strung their instruments. Accouterments, carpets and drapery were cleaned, and shaken and scented. The palace was as thick with sandal-wood smell as the sacrificial cave was of the stench of rotting flowers and leaves. Long ropes of blossoms were hung from jut to jut of every high carving. Peacocks' feathers (carefully garnered in chests and closets—for they'd come from afar, and had cost a great price) were taken out in their splendid, iridescent thousands to deck rooms and corridors; paints and perfumes in lacquered boxes, tinseled and jeweled tissues, rainbow-silk and crêpes from Japan, laces from Ceylon and Persia were heaped and tangled on every harem floor. The children, even the new-born girl baby, had their nails fresh-tinted, and the women's hands were rouged up to their knuckles.

Every posture-girl had new gauzy, tinsel-weighted garments, and at least one new ornament—nose-jewel or anklet or hair-plaque—and swayed on dancing feet with delight as she tried them on. Of all the palace, perhaps old Ak-kok was happiest. Her wrinkled parchment face was radiant, and in honor of to-morrow's greatness she herself wrung its head from a young pigeon, tore out its hot heart, still beating, and rammed it into La-swak's gaping mouth. He made a sick face at first, but then he found he liked it better than he'd thought, sucked it consideringly, then gave a sudden sick gulp, and the bird's still hot, pulsing

heart was down, hot and pulsing in La-swak. And old Ak-kok hugged him to her bony breast in ecstasy; for that the new-slaughtered vital had gone intact into the intestinal keeping of La-swak was unquestionable augury that he would live to be a great ruler, a mighty warrior and a favored priest of the Green Goddess.

Out of their byres and steep pasture-nooks (all the pasture places that the rough-hilled place afforded) the drowsy humped cattle were roused from their sleep by the laughing, shouting children that came to hang blossoms on their wrinkled necks. Two great steers chafed and pawed as agile men gilded their horns, avoiding them, the lowered horns, meanwhile as well as they could. Each horn-gilder had two other men beside him, protecting him with long bamboo poles, cruelly sharpened at one end, with which they prodded and bled the beast's sides as often as it seemed too inclined to charge. The steers bellowed and lurched and bled, the men gilded and pricked and ran sweat—it ran rapidly down their brown faces—and dodged as skilfully, but not as gracefully as Spanish matadors, and the rabble of children circled about them, waving deodar wands, and posies, screaming and clapping their thin olive hands, applauding and urging on quite impartially the angry bulls and the reeking men. These steers would have great pride of place in the morrow's spectacle, for theirs the office to trample the still warm sacrifices that were to be laid at the Goddess's feet, and to drag away between the cheering tight-packed ranks of the worshipers the de-severed trunks of the Feringhis. When the horns shone out through the night gilded and burnished, then the hoof-gilding came, more difficult still, and greatly more perilous; then when the infuriated, switching tails had been

The walls of the Temple echoed the sentence of death.
(*George Arliss' screen version "The Green Goddess."*)

paint-coated carmine and blue, the last finishing touch was given—great circles of green on each white heaving side, and the toilet was done. The gilders squatted down with grunts of relief—not too near—and mopped their faces with their sleeves, which they unwound for the purpose, and fell to kernel chewing or the smoking of long, green, Burmese-like cheroots. But the sacrificial steers were not allowed so to rest. The sharp bamboo poles still relentlessly kept them upright and firm on all fours, for they must neither squat nor relax till their fresh finery of gold-leaf and thick paint was quite dry.

Pregnant women in hut and on hillside were drinking hot gingered drams, and praying clamorously: for any child born as the death-horn sounded would bring with it into life great god-promised good-luck and strength and health, endless endurance, assured advancement—even a girl-child; for on her some man of the royal house's eyes would fall with pleasure one day.

The Great Horn of Rukh—after its temples and palace the Kingdom's first and deepest pride—was being obsequiously tended. Priests squatted about it incanting and chanting, wine was spilled on the fruit-and-grain-and-flower-piled crag it stood on, its great brazen throat was scoured and cleaned, and immense tribute of incense was burned about it.

Basil Traherne heard the execrable hubbub, and writhed in his thongs. He was well bound now; but twice in the night they brought him cups of warmed, strong wine, and he gulped it down, when held to his lips: he too resolved to husband his strength. Would the aircraft come? Had their message gone through? He feared. At the worst and last, would the Raja

spare Lucilla's life? He feared that most. He had no sleep.

Lucilla Crespin had none. She heard less of the din without and the movement within the palace than any other did—the Raja had contrived that as well as he could—but she heard enough. And she heard her own heart beat, and the chokes that strangled her throat. She thought she heard her nerves crack; she feared she was losing her nerve, her resolution and grip. Twice she heard her children cry. Once she heard her father call. No thong bound her, hands and limbs were unfettered, her couch was soft. But she knew that unseen black eyes were watching her vigilantly through some crack or crevice, she could not see either, and now and then she heard the sentries move as they changed guard. She tried to pray. But no prayer would shape or word in her tortured, trembling soul. But she thought that God knew. She lay on her rugs and pillows as motionless as she could—and waited. But when day smote the night, and dawn banished the dark, the night had marked her—let death come now, or life last long, that night had branded her for all time.

And no sleep came to the Raja of Rukh. His vigil was not the pleasantest kept. No reproach of conscience tormented him. He deemed the cruelty he was doing, and that that he intended to do when the sun next set, justice. His soul had no qualms. His Oriental mind had no doubt—no doubt of his full justification. The King could do no wrong, the venger of blood commit no unhallowed excess. But his thoughts had sour, sick qualms. Had the English Major's wireless gone through? Did Amil-Serai know? If so,

Rukh *knew*. And his pride had a hurt. What he desired he intended to take (if Amil-Serai did not send!) as far as he could. But he was powerless to take all; for the English woman would not *give*. Would she ever come to give? He wondered. Could he win that? His absolutism could command and enforce. But could he *win?* And his hookah tasted foul and sour as he sucked it. His swarthy face grew gray. His blood hungered, and the fine blue veins in his temples swelled and throbbed.

The man was afraid—not of what might come from Amil-Serai. He should dislike dethronement and banishment; but they were ever present possibilities in the heave and sag of Asian dynasties, and, if they came to him, he could face them as well as another, better than most—for he knew his way about on the continent of Europe, and could amuse himself there vastly. He knew how to secure a vast horde of treasure and jewels, how to get away with much of the horde of coins grimed under the bastioned palace. And no doubt Laswak would reign in his stead. No— he hoped that nothing would come from Amil-Serai, but, if it did, he—the Raja—knew how to meet and accept it. But the man was afraid—afraid of a personal defeat —defeat of a personal wish—an injury to personal pride and to personal vanity. His vanity was almost inordinate, and as sensitive as it was big, for his mind was too acute, his intelligence too fine for his vanity to be the thick, hidebound, invulnerable thing that it is at its happiest. His self-confidence had wider areas of attack than the skin of Achilles had.

He took no part now in the preparations for the bloody morrow. He had given his orders. They

would be obeyed. And for the rest, he but waited—alone, as little unserenely as he could. He had no sleep.

Of the palace servants there was one, only one, who took no part in those wild and elaborate preparations—for the motionless sentries who guarded the human objects of slaughter, and the young ayah, who salaamed as she proffered food to Lucilla Crespin, participated in it most importantly.

When the night time was thickest, a huddled thing rose from the floor in the room that had been slept in by Watkins, the Raja's English valet, and stole through corridors, archways and silent apartments, out of the palace, out through the walls, over the moat, out to the jungle: a half-naked, bleak-eyed woman.

The Raja, standing restless at a casement, saw her go, and smiled not unkindly. She'd not get there, but if she chose to try—perhaps to give her life in attempting it, it was nothing to him. He watched a moment, or two, then, "East and West, again!" he said with a shrug and turned on his heel. He had given no order that the thing down there a hundred feet below his snuggery's balcony should be fetched for burial, or given any obsequies, even the roughest, there where it was. The way was too perilous. He'd not risk one ankle of any soldier who was still his own living asset. He had had use for Watkins living, he had none for him dead. And he knew that without his command no one in Rukh—bar the ayah—would give the English satellite aught better than a curse or an expectoration of hate. "East and West," he repeated with a hard mirthless laugh.

Up towards the snow, down towards the jungle, on through the jungle she tore and broke her way, now

meshed in branches and bramble and cobra-like vines, now perched and scrambling goat-like on the edge of a precipice, the sandals ribboned and cut from her feet by stones, her one coarse garment ripped by thorns, her long black hair hanging unkempt about her naked shoulders. A vulture cried, jungle things growled and hissed, tom-toms crashed down below her, and then from above, but the ayah who had been Watkins' took no heed. Blood ran on her breasts where her own finger-nails had clawed them, blood caked on her mouth where her teeth had chewed it. Up in the lower snow-line a rivulet ran angrily, icy cold; she walked through it, her bleeding feet not feeling or shrinking its bitter, intense cold, as they would not have felt or shrunk had it boiled with heat as intense. The sharp prong of a down-hanging branch caught her ear, she tore it away, and the cartilage with it. On she went, now up, now down, heeding lynx-like where, not heeding how—seeking her dead. A geyser spring boiled up from red-hot stones, she went straight through it—it was the shortest way—neither slower nor faster. Up again to the higher place where the only footholds led her, the snow clogged her skirt—all that she wore—and its rough, unhemmed edge froze to her flesh—but it did not matter, since she did not know. Her hair and her forehead were smeared thick with ashes horridly mixed. She wore only her own matted hair, above her waist, below it only the rag of sackcloth. Her breath came in short, hard pants. Her sunken eyes burned red.

At last she found him—all that was left of him.

How she had beaten and clutched her way down the footholdless sides of that high ravine was unthinkable. No man could have done it, no goat without snapping

its legs, scarcely a snake without peeling off its skin and losing its sinuous balance.

But she had, and she crouched down, and moaned piteously over the broken, mangled remains—all that was left of him—left of a derelict cockney.

If England with her quiet waysides, her cowslip-flecked pastures, her gardens of roses, her fragrance of hop-vines, her red baubled cherry-trees, her flushed-face apples, her peaceful churchyards, her ivied gray village churches, her carol of cathedral bells, her emerald lawns, her oak-trees, her ribbon-hung May-poles with young health and happiness circling dance-steps about them, the ring of her playing fields, the sheen and the wealth of her rivers, her red-coats and her boys in blue, her clucking hens, and her sleek, lowing kine, her firesides and her castles, Oxford and Windermere, her sea-washed feet and her crown of fog—and her London slums—had shown him no womanliness, suckled him with no milk o' human kindness, given him no love, Asia had.

Had he been kind to her, the native woman, tossed to him soul and body, by a despot carelessly?

It looked like it.

It looked like it, as she knelt there moaning beside him, whispering tenderness and love words to him between her sobs—straightening his broken twisted limbs as well as she could, lifting his one hand—the other was red pulp-stripped bone—to her forehead.

When she had stolen from the palace she had held in one hand a cluster of marigolds. All the way she had come she had carried them carefully. She had them still. She held them against her breast for a moment, then gently pushed them into his hand, and laid it down.

The birds had been there before her—but not many, it was too far down, palled in darkness by the high walls of rock between which the strip of ravine lay so narrow. One hand—had it ever struck her?—was beaked and defiled, but not much else. Most of the human body she had loved, caressed and served lay there, horrid now, but hers.

A vulture cawed high up in a cypress. The woman heard, and crouched lower, like a hen over her chicks.

Out from some crack in the great wall of rock a lithe white-marked gray leopard peered. She heard its sudden purr of delight, and looked up at it, and its great green eyes glared down at them, ravished and famished. She heard the vulture's wings flap. She looked up—still higher, and saw the scavenger-bird's bald head thrust out, a vicious, fleshless skull in the clear moonlight above.

She saw. But she didn't care. As well one way as any other.

But nothing should harm him, nothing should touch a hair of that battered head—first.

She covered the thing beside her with her body, and waited.

The snow-leopard slunk, slowly, stealthily nearer.

The vulture craned its bleak bony head, and watched. It must wait—till the leopard had done.

And when day's first apple-green slipped up from the East, the native woman slept on her last marriage bed.

It was very quiet.

CHAPTER XLI

IT well might have been the wedding-day of heaven and earth, it was so lovely. There were scant wild flowers in Rukh, but each that there was lifted up a glad, gay face. There are few song-birds in the Himalayas, but a lark sang and swayed on the spear-shaped lace of a green bamboo, and a choir of thrushes throated up a silver carol of song from the full-berried rowans. Yellow sunshine lay in unbroken, imperial swathes everywhere. Children laughed and pranked, women sang at their tasks—none doing more than she must to-day—men smoked and walked about arm in arm.

All was ready—except the hour—and all were radiant, expectant and happy. There was feasting and love-making, goodwill and fellowship. And the priests moved about with an arrogant swing of their hips, and all the people salaamed at their approach, as if they'd been gods themselves, instead merely the servers of gods, and dressed in their best garb.

At the full of the mid-day heat a great hush fell. There was no breath of air, nothing moved. All Rukh seemed waiting in eager silence like some great beast poised to spring. The hours crawled seemingly stagnantly through the water clocks, and the green and blue dragon-flies seemed asleep on the down of the bronze and lemon thistles.

Lucilla grew calmer and braver as the slow moments went, because the end was nearer. It was some-

thing of stimulant, and something of narcotic too, that so soon it would be over—strain, fear, suspense gone forever.

Only the young ayah came near her—bringing her food and drink, silently offering her attendance. No message came from the Raja, and she sent him none. No message could have come, unless written, or brought by him himself—since none left in his service now could speak any word she'd understand.

Traherne felt turning to stone. He no longer was bound, but he scarcely moved. They brought too to him food and drink. He took what he could, and waited stonily—neither patient nor impatient. The long night had sapped his emotion. He was numb rather than tormented. Tension and regret (the air flight had been his suggestion) and pallid fear had mercifully gnawed away his power to feel or to suffer much.

They had not met since he'd been pinioned in the snuggery, and dragged roughly from it. No message —except thought's throbbing wireless—had reached either from either. Neither had heard anything of the other.

But—however dulled their senses, however lulled their pain, each watched and wished for the sun to sink, and each listened ceaselessly with straining ears to catch the first distant throb of a far-off aeroplane's engine.

None came.

The sun was sinking at last, slowly, surely.

And again expectant human noises and stir came in the palace and out in the rocky, mountainous open. And again hatred, blood-lust and fanaticism belched through the shimmering air, and the stench of mari-

golds and cocoanut oil, and the reek of lewd, guttural songs.

The Raja of Rukh strained hearing and nerves for the sound of English aeroplanes.

None came.

The sun sank lower.

A group of priests was gathered at the doorway of the great gloomy hall that opened on to the public open place of greatest and ceremonial sacrifice—as priests had gathered there for centuries at such times as this, when big tribal events called for special observation, of triumph, or defeat or peril quivered and bleated for special appeasement of their six-armed deity. Wild-eyed, four-footed, soft-skinned creatures had been slaughtered in their terrified, moaning hecatombs out there in that courtyard, and human lives had been offered in sacrifice there before this—the lives of miscreants who had angered a prince—but not often enemy lives—not nearly often enough: Rukh lay too far from other principalities, too remote, too rock-and-peak-bound, and the tribes that lay nearest were too strong and warlike, too as apt to give defeat as to meet it. And never before had the courtyard ground run red with white blood.

To-day was the supreme day of Rukh's history. Not a man there, not a little child, not a woman giving suck as they waited, but thanked the gods for having been born, and having lived to see it.

To see the white man die, when the blood-red of the sunset came! They ached for that. And most of all they longed to see the Feringhi woman slaughtered, and her head laid at the feet of their Goddess. Not one here had ever seen a white woman die, not even the ancient few who had trapped and disemboweled

human prey near the Khyber. Only one of them all ever had seen a Feringhi woman until two days ago when the great bird had thrown at the feet of their Goddess the Feringhi woman who was being decked now, up there in the palace, in her death robes.

It was the woman's death they most longed to see —a white she-victim slain at the feet of the great green she-god! It was that that they craved with drunken, demented longing.

For a whisper had crept through the Kingdom of Rukh.

And the women there, waiting and lusting, longed for it most.

The crowd at the edge of the courtyard seethed and pushed. And silk-clad, veil-and-shawl-shrouded figures glided down from the palace-harem, some in their litters, some on foot, squeezed in among the crowding, packed peasants, harem ladies, royal-born or bought for great price. Their jewels jingled and flashed under their shawls and veils, and they scented the day with attar of roses.

A priest with an unscabbarded sword in his hand guarded the opening into the great hall, but the Chief Priest stood just inside it, holding the curtains that hung there slightly apart, peering out at the waiting, exultant people—he liked them well, as he saw them—and scanning the path that came down from the castle.

There are several halls not unlike this back of the Himalayas; there is none in the Punjab.

Great columns of wood, rudely carved with distorted animal and human figures, supported the high roof. The walls too were of wood—it was rarer and costlier in Rukh than stone—carved as rudely and gro-

tesquely, and they were pierced, higher by several feet than a tallest man's head, by a rough clerestory—a series of oblong slits through which the deep blue sky, just changing to sunset's splendid motley, showed like a velvet drop-cloth of some magnificent theatric spectacle. Roofs and walls and pillars were a dead, dull, dark brown—somber, foreboding—but here and there the interstices between the repellent carvings were washed a dull red. At one side of the hall a high curtained doorway, the curtain a terrible tapestry of human slaughter and gods' amours, led into the awful disrobing room, where priests put on their costliest vestments, and victims their garlands of sacrifice. An opposite door was heavily barred, but an oblong hole, when its sliding shutter was slid, made a hagioscope through which the guard within could inspect whoever approached it from without. At the far end of the hall heavy curtains, similar indecent tapestries, covered a wide opening.

The late afternoon light, burning in through the clerestory slits, dappled the somber floor.

A rhythmic, subdued murmur swayed through the expectant crowd, and as slow figures came down the castle-path swelled into a tossing sea-like storm of deep and hushed execration, but the women smiled as they cursed, the children still sucked at their long sticks of sweet-cane and painted sugars, and the downy babies still sucked at the brown breasts of their mothers.

Tom-toms crashed, drums echoed, pipes screeled, skin and reed implements sounded tunelessly. A woman sobbed in ecstasy—others caught it up and chorused it.

The guard at the bolted door, a tiger-faced, panther-pelt-clad bronze giant, slipped back the "squint's" shut-

ter and looked through it, then unbolted and swung open the door.

Two lusty soldiers carried in and set down a rude mountain chair. Two other soldiers guarded it on either side, and in it, tight-lipped, proud-eyed, strapped to it securely, sat the English doctor, Basil Traherne.

Timed to the second, the Raja of Rukh appeared at the opposite door as the chair was borne in. His cloth-of-gold and rose and green satin robes, but shaped like a priest's, barely showed through the barbaric blaze of the jewels that encrusted them. The autocrat-priest gestured, and the soldier-bearers put down the chair; he motioned again and the four soldiers drew away to the courtyard's edge.

And victim and tyrant-judge eyed each other silent and grim.

Then Rukh smiled slightly and spoke. "Well, Doctor," he said in his slow, velvet voice, "it doesn't appear that any 'god from the machine' is going to interfere with our program."

"You are bringing a terrible vengeance upon yourself," the Englishman said sternly. But it sounded as if he scarcely troubled to say it at all.

"Think, my dear Doctor," the Raja retorted lightly. "If, as the Major said, he did not get your S.O.S. through, I have nothing to fear. If he lied, and did get it through, nothing can ultimately save me, and I may as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb."

"You might have spared me this!" the Englishman said, writhing, in spite of himself, in his bonds.

"A ritual detail, Doctor," Rukh said deprecatingly; "not quite without reason. Persons lacking in self-control might throw themselves to the ground, or otherwise disarrange the ceremony."

"I am not without self-control," the physician told him haughtily.

The Raja bowed, smiling slightly; then gave a curt order, at which the bearers hastened back and cut the thongs, and as Traherne strode, still a little cramped, from the chair, carried it away.

Traherne looked about him hurriedly—but what he hoped and feared to see was not there.

"What have you done with Mrs. Crespin?" he demanded.

"Don't be alarmed," was the smooth reply; "she will be here in due time."

"Listen to me, Raja," Traherne said in a low, earnest voice, going very close to the other, almost laying his hand on Rukh's sleeve. "Do what you will with me, but let Mrs. Crespin go. Send her to India or to Russia, and I am sure, for her children's sake, she will swear to keep absolute silence as to her husband's fate and mine."

"You don't believe, then, that I couldn't save you if I would?" Rukh demanded.

"Believe it?" Traherne scoffed. "No!"

The Raja smiled. "You are quite right, my dear Doctor. I am not a High Priest for nothing. I might work the oracle. I might get a command from the Goddess to hurt no hair upon your heads."

"Then," Traherne asked, "what devilish pleasure do you find in putting us to death?"

"Pleasure?" Rukh echoed. "The pleasure of a double vengeance. Vengeance for to-day—my brothers—and vengeance for centuries of subjection and insult. Do you know what brought you here?" he said with sudden smothered passion. "It was not

blind chance, any more than it was the Goddess. It was my will, my craving for revenge, that drew you here by a subtle, irresistible magnetism. My will is my religion—my god. And by that god I have sworn that you shall not escape me. Ah," he broke off, speaking calmly, as wild yells broke from the now frenzied crowd outside, "they are bringing Mrs. Crespin."

For a moment Traherne shielded his eyes with his hands, they were trembling, then he mastered himself —and looked.

A priest was unbolting the door through which they had carried him, and when it was opened wide, as he had been brought, she was brought, through the door, into the grim, dark hall.

But she had come in more state. Her chair was rich and gilded, and cushioned. She too was bound, but the thongs that roped her were lightly twisted flowers—the rarest blooms of the palace gardens and glass.

The woman's face was white and fixed, but her glowing eyes were brave.

The Raja went to her at once, and bent as he said, "I apologize, Madam, for the manners of my people. Their fanaticism is beyond my control."

She met his eyes, but she did not speak.

At a word from him her chair was lowered steadily to the ground. And the Raja did not intervene when Traherne held out his hand to steady her as she stepped from the palanquin—but as the European hands met he smiled.

"How long have we left?" Traherne asked, as the men were taking the empty palanquin away.

Rukh answered at once, "Till the sun's rim touches the crest of the mountains. A blast of our great mountain-horn will announce the appointed hour, and you will be led out to the sacred enclosure. You saw the colossal image of the Goddess out yonder?" he pointed behind him.

As the chair-carriers had borne the Englishwoman in, four priests—it had needed four—had pulled aside the heavy tapestries at the hall's far end. Beyond the opening two broad steps led to a wide tribune or balcony. Over the balustrade that backed it loomed, some fifty yards away, the head and shoulders of a colossal image of the Green Goddess. On the tribune itself was, on a dais of two steps, a wide, gorgeous and fantastic throne formed of barbaric filigrees, enormous elephants' tusks heavily jeweled, great writhing gold and silver snakes with grinning monkey heads, and far-spread tails of gem-made peacocks' feathers. The throne-seat itself was low and cushioned, not much more than a great, wide cushion, with other cushions for arms; and for back—it had no other—another figure of the Goddess carved in high relief, with barbaric traceries about her, behind her, and on her robes. From great, flat brow to square, rectangular feet she was green—a violent, virulent, hideous green—but in her great, rough-hewn ornaments, her massive crown and in the squirmed and unsymmetrical traceries there were touches of gold—wide daubs and swathes some, some but glimmering hair-lines. A low brazier rested on the ground fronting the throne, and an acrid odor came from the light green smoke that curled up from the brazier.

Traherne barely glanced to where the Raja pointed.

The woman neither turned her head nor moved her eyes—they did not leave Traherne's face.

"Will you grant us one last request?" the Englishman asked.

"By all means," was the native's instant, suave reply, "if it is my power. In spite of your inconsiderate action of yesterday—"

"Inconsiderate—?" Traherne blurted.

"Watkins, you know—poor Watkins—a great loss to me! But *à la guerre comme à la guerre!* I bear no malice for a fair act of war. I am anxious to show you every consideration." He spoke to Dr. Traherne, but he included Mrs. Crespin by a deferential gesture, and his tone was for her.

"Then," Traherne said quickly and earnestly, "you will leave us alone for the time that remains to us?"

"Why, by all means," Rukh returned as quickly. "And oh, by the way, you need have no fear of the —ceremony—being protracted. It will be brief and —I trust—painless. The High Church Party are not incapable of cruelty; but I have resolutely set my face against it."

He paused a moment, irresolute, debating with himself. Then he quietly stepped close to Lucilla Crespin. She had stood gazing stonily into space while he and Traherne had been speaking, and she stood so still, took no notice of him as he came to her, none when he spoke to her.

"Before I go, Madam," he said, "may I remind you of my offer of yesterday? It is not too late." She took no notice. "Is it just to your children to refuse?" he urged. Traherne saw her hands tremble, and she looked in Rukh's eyes, meeting them with a look of

stone. But she did not speak, and her fixed and rigid face gave no sign—only her hard, cold eyes looked his through.

Rukh looked back into hers, and waited.

Still she gave no sign.

"Immovable?" he said at last. "So be it!" And he turned to go. But a great yell of triumphant hatred weltered up from the waiting people outside—such clamor and frenzy as they had not uttered yet—and the Raja turned back, and spoke to her once more.

"Your husband's body, Madam," he told her, watching her narrowly. "They are laying it at the feet of the Goddess."

He had moved the Englishwoman at last.

"You promised me—" she began, and her voice and her face shook.

"That it should be burnt," Rukh assented. "I will keep my promise. For a white foe's body to lie at the foot of an Asian god, honors not dishonors it! I regret, if it pains you. But, you see, I had three brothers—a head for a head." He bowed slightly and passed slowly into the inner chamber from which he had come, and his priests, waiting till now by the curtains before the throne, clustered about him, and followed him.

But a guard remained. He waited by the now re-bolted door they had been carried through; he took no step towards them—but he watched.

Lucilla sank down on the broad base of a pillar—her legs were trembling, and her heart felt queer and sick.

Traherne could not speak to her yet.

"So this is the end!" she said in a hard, toneless voice. She was not dressed for sacrifice—Rukh's

orders had spared her that—and she waited her butchery in the tweed in which she had landed.

"What offer did that devil make you?" he asked through stiffened lips.

"Oh," she replied after a moment, "I didn't mean to tell you, but I may as well. He is an ingenious tormentor," she said with a pitiful shrug. "He offered yesterday to let me live, and to kidnap the children, and bring them here to me—you know on what terms."

"To bring the children here?" Dr. Traherne said oddly, his eyes scanning her wonderingly, his hands crunched together.

"He said," she went on, and her voice broke on her words a little, "in a month I might have them in my arms. Think of it! Ronny and Iris in my arms!"

Traherne turned away from her, as she crouched huddled and broken in her grief and hunger.

He could not look at her.

He stood so for some time—his back to her.

The populace screamed and shrieked. They did not hear them.

At last, still his back to her, Dr. Traherne said in a low and unsteady voice, "Are you sure you did right to refuse?"

CHAPTER XLII

ALL through the last night's torture it had been his fear and his agony that, if no help came to them, she might *not* die. Until now—here in the very presence of their impending murder, his *and hers,* he had doubted that the Raja of Rukh would not accomplish by absolute force the purpose which he, Traherne, perfectly understood. But now, the death-preparations seemed too complete, the death-stroke too near, and he was convinced that as the sun sank to the Himalayan crests that head, bent in agony in an English mother's trembling grief as he'd turned away from the sight of her, would roll in the dirt—between his and the severed head of Crespin's corpse—at the feet of that monstrous idol out there, while the demonized people danced and shrieked about it—spat on it perhaps.

Should she let it come to that?

Was the price she must pay for life, ultimate escape to come after a time, perhaps, hideous, unspeakable as it was, not a price she ought to pay? Would not her very abhorrence of it make it clean, a sacrificial holiness rather than defilement?

It was a terrible question.

Could he answer it? Had he any right to bid her die, to let her die without strong protest from him, when she had even *this* chance of escape?

Up there in the beetling, brooding palace of Rukh, in her prison chamber, in the tortured night, Lucilla Crespin had faced that question, had canvassed it, had

tried to weigh it sanely. And there alone with her own soul and her God, while the song and laughter of those who sharpened the swords and decked the place of slaughter came to her through the night, she had answered it.

She had answered it nobly. She had answered it in the only way that such an Englishwoman as she—her father's child and her mother's—could answer it perhaps.

But was that noble, womanly answer the *noblest?*

She had answered it—in her only way.

Basil Traherne was trying to answer it now.

His soul writhed, his very flesh, so soon to be nothing, ached with the pain and difficulty of answering the nearly unanswerable, loathsome, hideous question.

Standing here, dying even now, for help would have come long hours ago, if Crespin's call had gone through, hearing again the horrible calls and shouts of the maddened throng out there, hearing the woman here with him moaning for her children, the question of right and wrong, of best or worst for her and for her fatherless children, beat at him like a flail of white-hot metal. And the thought of the white body he loved tortured and mangled out there—now—almost now—weighted his reasoning. It must. It must have done that.

He could *not* decide! He did not *see.*

"Are you sure you did right to refuse?" he repeated, and sweat colder than death broke on his face.

"Do you mean—?" the woman asked.

"Are you sure it is not wrong to refuse?" he asked almost harshly.

"Oh," the tortured, cowering woman cried, "how can you—? Right? Wrong? What are right and

wrong to me now?" she sobbed. "If I could see my children again, would any scruple of 'right' or 'wrong' make me shrink from anything that was possible?" she asked passionately. "But this is so utterly, utterly impossible."

He turned and went to her then. "Forgive me," he begged. "You know it would add an unspeakable horror to death, if I had to leave you here. But I felt I must ask you whether you had fully considered—"

"I have thought of nothing else through all these torturing hours," she told him gravely.

"How brave you are!" he said in a choked voice. But his eyes were very proud.

"Not brave, not brave," she moaned. "If I could live, I would—there, I confess it! But I should die of shame and misery, and leave my children—to that man. Or, if I did live, what sort of a mother should I be to them? They would be much better without me! Oh," she sobbed, "my precious, precious darlings!" She clasped her arms across her breast, and rocked herself in agony.

The moments passed.

The slow sinking sun streaked its red warning through the clerestory slits.

"Lucilla!" He laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Oh, Basil," she looked up at him, "say you think it won't be altogether bad for them! They will never know anything of their father now but what was good. And their mother will simply have vanished into the skies. They will think she has flown away to heaven —and who knows but it may be true? There may be something beyond this hell."

"We shall soon know, Lucilla," he answered gently.

"But to go away and leave them without a word—!"

she moaned again. "Poor little things, poor little things!"

"They will remember you as something very dear and beautiful," he said, as he knelt down beside her, and gathered her hands into his. "The very mystery will be like a halo about you."

"Shall I see them again, Basil?" she moaned. "Tell me that."

There was a moment's silence.

Then, "Who knows?" the man said gravely. "Even to comfort you, I won't say I am certain. But I do sincerely think you may."

"You think," she asked with a woeful smile, "there is a sporting chance?"

"More than that," was Traherne's emphatic reply. "This life is such a miracle—could any other be more incredible?"

"But even if I should meet them in another world," she mourned, "they would not be my Ronny and Iris, but a strange man and a strange woman, built up of experiences in which I had had no share. Oh, it was cunning, cunning, what that devil said to me! He said, 'God Himself cannot give you back their childhood.'"

"How do you know that God is going to take their childhood from you?" he comforted her quickly. "You may be with them this very night—with them, unseen, but perhaps not unfelt, all the days of their life."

She shook her head sadly. "You are saying that to make what poor Antony called a 'haze' for me—to soften the horror of darkness that is waiting for us. Don't give me 'dope,' Basil—I can face things without it."

"I mean every word of it," the man said stoutly.

They kept silence a little then.

The man almost wished that the summons would come.

Suddenly Lucilla Crespin smiled a little.

"Why," he asked incredulously, "do you smile?"

"At a thought that came to me," she told him; "the thought of poor Antony as a filmy and purified spirit. It seems so unthinkable!"

Traherne—even here—wished she had not said it. But he always had been fairer to Antony Crespin than, for years, the disillusioned wife had been able to be. "Why unthinkable?" he argued. "Why may he not still exist, though he has left behind him the nerves, the cravings, that tormented him—and you. You have often," he reminded her gently, "told me that there was something fine in the depths of his nature. I have always known it. And you know how he showed it yesterday."

"Oh, if I could only tell the children how he died!" Lucilla exclaimed longingly.

"But," Traherne said sadly, "his true self was hopelessly out of gear. The chain is broken, the machine lies out there—scrapped. Do you think that he was just that machine, and nothing else? *I* tell you, No!"

"But I don't know," she said drearily. "Anyway, Basil—if Antony leaves his—failings, you must leave behind your work. Do you want another life in which there is no work for you to do—no disease to be rooted out? Don't tell me you don't long to take your microscope with you wherever you may be going."

"Perhaps there are microscopes waiting me there," Traherne said slowly.

"Spirit microscopes for spirit microbes? You don't believe that, Basil."

"I neither believe nor disbelieve," he told her. "In

all we can say of another life we are like children blind from birth, trying to picture the form and colors of the rainbow."

"If," she persisted sadly, "we are freed from all human selfishness, shall I love my children more than any other woman's? Can I love a child I cannot kiss, that cannot look into my eyes, and kiss me back again?"

"Oh," he cried roughly, springing up as he spoke, "Lucilla, don't! Don't remind me of all we are losing! I meant to leave it all unspoken—the thought of him lying out there seemed to tie my tongue. But we have only one moment on this side of eternity. Lucilla, shall I go on?"

CHAPTER XLIII

"SHALL I go on?"

He waited for her to say.

After an instant's pause, she bowed her head.

"Do you think," he cried, "it is with a light heart that I turn my back upon the life of earth, and all it might have meant for you and me—for you and me, Lucilla?"

"Yes," the woman whispered, "Basil, for you and me."

He reached down his hands, and she rose, letting him help her, and stood beside him.

"Rather than live without you," he told her, "I am glad to die with you; but, oh, what a wretched gladness compared with that of living with you, and loving you! I wonder if you have guessed what it has meant to me, ever since we met at Dehra Dun, to see you as another man's wife? It has been hell—hell!"

"Yes," she said, "I know, Basil. I have known from the beginning."

"Oh, what do I care," he cried passionately, "for a bloodless, shadowy life—life in the abstract, with all the senses extinct? Better eternal sleep!"

"Oh, Basil," the woman said, "you are going back on your own wisdom. Shall we not there—where we are going—"

"Wisdom!" he exclaimed with hot contempt. "What has wisdom to say to love, thwarted and unfulfilled? You were right when you said that it is a mockery to

speak of love without hands to clasp, without lips to kiss."

"I, too," the woman owned, "regret—perhaps as much as you—that things were—as they were. But not even your love—"

A trumpet-blast interrupted her—a long, deep, wailing sound. And out in the open behind the temple a pheasant rocketed up, with a scream of fright.

"There is the signal!" Lucilla whispered—not without a shudder. "Good-bye, dear love."

She held out her hands to him. He drew her reverently into his arms, and bent a passionate, quivering face to hers. And so, they who were about to die, gave and took their first kiss. Lips lingered on lips, flesh clung to flesh. Neither spoke again—but telling each other more than words could say. They needed no words now, and they had none.

A crash of tom-toms and a low muttered chant came from behind the curtains through which the Raja had gone when he'd left them. A moment they clung the closer, then slowly and proudly drew the little apart that English dignity bade, and stood hand-in-hand facing the doorway as its curtains parted, and the death processional came in, moved upon them.

"Basil," she whispered, and he caught what she said, though her lips scarcely moved, "kill me, kill me now!"

"Dear," he whispered, "I have nothing—"

"Your hands!" she said. "Your hands are strong!"

Could he? he asked himself. He looked with stricken eyes at her pulsing throat. Could he? It must be done quickly, if done. They would overpower him at the first uplift of his hand. Why had he not thought of it before, while yet there'd been

time, when still they'd been here alone? Fool! Wicked fool! But to have shortened so the short, short space of their love's fulfilment! It would have been hard.

"Not yet—" he murmured. And he knew he would attempt it presently—at the last, last breath of moment left them.

Priests came first, chanting as they came, fantastically dressed, and each wearing some indescribable demon, high up-standing head-dress. Except the High Priest all were masked—the masks impossible, monstrous devils and animals. After them the Raja of Rukh came, walking, with folded arms, alone. He also wore now a priestly head-dress, richer, even more grotesque than theirs, and a stole-like garment, and one shaped like a cope, each a glittering jewel-mass. The long, flat, scarf-like, wide strip of fur, brocade and jewels that fell from either side from over his shoulders down to his ankles looked something a stole, the azure arabesqued drapery below it looked something a cope—so oddly, in surface things, do East and West often show to touch.

Behind him, walking abreast, came three dark-robed, sinister figures, plainly masked and hooded, carrying heavy, shining swords. They were the proudest men in Rukh to-day, for by right of their office well-performed each would claim, and be accorded, privilege to send a girl-child to the Rukh's harem. Out there close by the great waiting Goddess, close to the spot where the swords would swing and hack at the white offered necks, the three little girls stood side by side dressed in the saffron-edged magenta of brides, their dark little faces golden and shining with joy, each eyeing the other two rather scornfully.

After the executioners followed musicians—in splendid, more secular motley, their cheeks puffed out mump-like with the exertion that blew weird notes through Rukh's weird sacred reed and bamboo instruments.

When they reached it the priests grouped themselves about the throne, salaaming to it twice, thrice to the Goddess that backed it.

Rukh paused an instant at the prisoners. "May I trouble you to move a little aside?" he asked with insolent civility. "I am, for the moment, not a king, but a priest, and must observe a certain holy dignity. Ridiculous, isn't it?"

They made way for him—but still the man held close in his own the woman's hand. And her fingers clung to his like twisted, writhed icicles now.

He passed slowly on to the throne and, to a reiterated salvo of priestly salaams and of shrilled flutes, took his seat.

The people screamed and moaned with delight and loyalty.

Rukh spoke again to the woman standing there waiting with her hand still in her lover's. Traherne was trembling almost violently now, Lucilla Crespin was perfectly still.

"Must I do violence to my feelings, Madam," the Raja-priest said, "by including you in the approaching ceremony? There is still time."

She took no other notice, but she met his eyes.

"We autocrats," he added, "are badly brought up. We are not accustomed to having our desires, or even our whims thwarted."

"Will you never cease tormenting this lady?" Traherne cut in violently. "Get on with your butchery!"

The Raja paid as little attention to Traherne as the Englishwoman had paid to the Raja.

"Remember my power," Rukh continued. "If I may not take you back to my palace as my queen, I can send you back as my slave. . . . Have you nothing to say? . . . I repeat my offer as to your children. . . . Remember, too, that, if I so will it, you cannot save them by dying. I can have them kidnapped—or—I can have them killed."

She answered him then—with a wild, anguished shriek.

An Englishman's endurance snapped. He threw Lucilla's poor, cold hands from his, and with an enfiended cry of, "Devil," rushed on the throne, and leapt at the Raja's diamond-circled throat; did it so suddenly, so quickly that before the startled priests could gather their bemazed wits he had pinned the Raja against the back of his throne.

But instantly then the huddled priests flung on Traherne, pulled him off—he was one, they were more than a score—pinioned him roughly, and dragged him struggling away.

Fast and furiously the priests chattered together, and the Chief Priest prostrated himself in hot supplication before the throne where the Raja sat coldly smiling. He heard the Chief Priest gravely, then rose and passed him with a word—pressed through the priests thronged near the throne, they striving to dissuade him, and went to Traherne, whom several of the priests who had seized him still held securely.

"Chivalrous but ill-advised, Dr. Traherne," the Raja remarked. "I regret it, and so will you. My colleagues here insist that, as you have laid impious hands on the chief of their sacred caste, your death alone will

not appease the fury of the Goddess. They insist upon subjecting you to a process of expiation—a ritual of great antiquity—but—" He broke off significantly.

"You mean torture?" Traherne spoke calmly.

"Well—yes," Rukh admitted regretfully.

Lucilla Crespin came towards them with a cry.

"Not you, Madam—not you—"

"I must speak to you—speak to you alone!" she gasped. "Send Dr. Traherne away."

Rukh looked at her searchingly.

Traherne understood her. "Lucilla!" he exclaimed, entreaty and command in his tone. "What are you thinking of! Lucilla—!"

At a gesture from the Raja, the priests who were guarding Traherne bent over him, and he crumpled up like a storm-buffeted autumn leaf, and his voice trailed weakly, then died away. Japanese ju-jutsu is a thing of feather, and slow and uncertain compared to the brutal knack that these temple priests had practiced on Basil Traherne. Their theology may have been as rotten and flabby as it was absurd and fanatic, but their athletic skill and their fighting knowledge of human anatomy were fine.

"I beg you—I beg you!" the woman implored brokenly, wildly. "One minute—no more!"

Rukh looked at her curiously, studying her searchingly, for a moment—a sharp gleam in his narrowed eyes—shrugged his cope-covered shoulders, and gave a terse order, and Traherne, inert and almost unconscious, was dragged away, and out through the door through which he had been carried into the temple hall.

In her desperation the woman had rushed up the steps of the throne. Now in her exhaustion she sank down on one end of the actual throne itself—sharing

it crushed and abjectly with him—the broken suppliant of an absolute king.

Rukh was watching her narrowly with a serpent-look in passion-full eyes. He held his silence—and waited.

"Let him go," she panted, when she could speak, "let him go, send him back to India unharmed, and—it shall be as you wish."

CHAPTER XLIV

OUTSIDE the waiting people were eating oily sweetmeats and greasier cakes and water-lily seeds, drinkly sickly fermented goats' milk, and watching now sacred snakes tearing living birds to bleeding pieces—a priest-granted sight both to whet and hold in leash their maddened blood-thirst for the greater slaughter to come—so soon to come now; for the sun had not ceased to sink; and here in the dark, terrible hall the tawny prince in gauds of satins and gems, and the white-skinned woman in a plain tweed gown, bartered and played for a man's life, a woman's soul and body. A Raja staked a whim and a lust, an Englishwoman staked her all.

They staked and threw.

And the sun sank lower.

"Soho!" Rukh said at last, all the kindness real or assumed gone from his voice, the wicked light of a primitive, angry feeling disfiguring his eyes, "you will do for your lover—to save him a little additional pain—what you would not do to have your children restored to you! Suppose I agree—would he accept this sacrifice?"

"No," the woman said quickly, "no, he wouldn't—but he must have no choice. That is part of the bargain. Send him—bound hand and foot, if need be—down to Kashmir, and put him over the frontier—"

"You don't care what he thinks of you?" Rukh broke in.

"He will know what to think," the woman said.

"And I too, Madam," Rukh retorted with a short, ugly laugh, "know what to think." Kneeling—there was nothing of supplication about it—with one knee on the throne, he caught her shoulders in his delicate, sinewy olive hands, and turned her face to him. "Come, look me in the eyes," he ordered, "and tell me that you honestly intend to fulfill your bargain! . . . I knew it!" For her eyes had flinched. "You are playing with me! But the confiding barbarian is not so simple as you imagine. No woman has ever tried to fool me that has not repented it. You think, when you have to pay up, you will fob me off with your dead body. Let me tell you, I have no use for you dead—I want you with all the blood in your veins, with all the pride in that damned sly brain of yours. I want to make my plaything of your beauty, my mockery of your pride. I want to strip off the delicate English lady, and come down to the elemental woman, the handmaid and the instrument of man." His passion had risen higher and higher with the words he'd fed it, and his now wide open eyes glowed like the eyes of a brute. The woman crouching there at the side of the barbaric throne, clutching it desperately for the support she desperately needed, looked at him dumbly and numb, her terror-stricken and fascinated eyes like those of some forest youngling the snake is poised to strike—powerless to move, powerless even to cry.

His tone changed, his voice fell a note. "Come now, I'll make you a plain offer. I will put Dr. Traherne over the frontier, and, as they set him free, my people shall hand him a letter written by you at my dictation. You will tell him that you have determined to accept my protection and make this your home." She bowed

her head in bitter acquiescence. "Consequently you wish to have your children conveyed to you here—"

"Never—never—never!" She pelted it at him, her pallid face set and fixed, her dazed numbed eyes alight again, her broken body tense again. "I will make no bargain that involves my children."

"You see!" Rukh laughed—a fiendish, ugly laugh. "You will give me no hostages for the fulfillment of your bond. But a pledge of your good faith I must have. For without a pledge, Madam, I don't believe in it one little bit." And as he paused he snapped his fingers delicately.

"What pledge?" she asked desperately.

"Only one is left—Dr. Traherne himself," the Raja told her. "I may—though it will strain my power to the uttermost—save his life, while keeping him in prison. Then, when you have fulfilled your bond—fulfilled it to the uttermost, mark you!—when you have borne me a child—I will let him go free. But the moment you attempt to evade your pledge, by death or escape, I will hand him over to the priests to work their will with, and I will put no restraint upon their savage instincts."

There are life-decisions to be made, that come to some, now and then, so hideous in their complexity, that the bravest soul, the clearest mind, the purest heart must shudder and sicken at the insupportable task—grope—hesitate—waver—faint. Knowing not what to do, but knowing that whatever one's course, regret must be its long, hard aftermath, moral strength crumples up and is frail and trembling at such hideous cross-roads of conduct—and right and wrong, highest virtue and lowest crime seem inextricably mixed. And however it wrings us, not one but must experience a mea-

sure of relief and thankfulness when such terrible deciding is by some overruling whipped out of our hands, and the befuddled wavering soul is left intense suffering merely, but spared responsibility and remorse.

This was the hardest moment of Lucilla Crespin's life. She did not know how to decide. She could not decide. But she knew that she must. And she did have to—there was no possible escape for her, unless Heaven itself actually and now peeped "through the blanket of the dark" and threw down its verdict. And upon the woman's deciding of this must rest the ultimate appraisement of her, of her character, and of the soundness and sweetness of her moral judgment. But two possible decisions lay for her choosing. No more choice than that was offered her. And by her decision between the terrible two her claim to the highest personal fineness, strength and nobility must stand or fall. Either way could be taken nobly, and in self-sacrifice —but one of the two led to the higher heights—one was supreme.

She did not know, as she cowered, huddled there, how she should decide. But she knew that in some way she would and must.

Rukh waited and watched her. But the sun was going, throwing its last gay pools of Tuscan gold on the hall's dim floor, its angry pools of red on the courtyard, turning the feet of the gigantic Green Goddess to blood.

And he saw, and said, "Choose, my dear lady, choose!"

The moment had come.

She lifted her head wearily, clenched tighter on the jeweled edge of the throne, her lips moved difficultly to a word. "I choose—"

He bent nearer to catch her labored saying, his dark Eastern face tense and keen, his eyes excited, not unanxious. For he not only wanted his own way, but he intensely wished to have it in his own way.

"—then—to—"

Slowly her eyes left his face. Her words did not break or trail—they stopped. She lifted her face towards the clerestory slits, and listened. She listened—more intensely than ever at Lucknow a woman had listened—and an impalpable shimmer of hope dawned on Mrs. Crespin's face.

The murmur of the crowd below sounded subdued. It broke, and ceased.

Were they listening too?

With a shriek of insane excitement, the wild overflow of self-control and despair undammed at last, the cowering woman sprang to her feet.

"Aeroplanes!" she cried. "The aeroplanes!" she shouted and laughed. "Basil! Basil! The aeroplanes!"

CHAPTER XLV

IT was true.

Out in the sacred courtyard where all had been babel and noise, a terrible stillness had come—every head thrown back, every startled black eye strained to the sky. Through the silence—human noise petrified by quaking fear of the unknown—came a faint, but rapidly increasing whirr and throb, no more at first than the gossamer sound of lazy dragon-fly wings, then more and more, till the air reeked with the high-up grating sound.

Like a flight of dragon-flies—gray, far and filmy, the plane-birds came, then like a school of black-bellied fish with backs of gold and rose in the sunset glow, then like some flock of monster well-trained birds, a battalion perhaps of the great rocs the mazed people believed them, nearer and nearer they came, lower and lower they swooped.

Through the royal, blue blanket of the Asian sky England had peeped, and whatever his priests and people thought, the Raja of Rukh—he'd not altered his attitude, except to gaze steadily up, listening intently, he'd not let his face or his eyes change—*knew* that England swooping puissantly down had cried to him, "Hold! Enough!"

With a sob of relief, repeating again in a low, quivering voice, "The aeroplanes—the aeroplanes!" Lucilla tottered to the door through which Traherne had been pushed. The priests were too amazed to oppose or stay her, as his guard had been to stay or oppose Tra-

herne, and as she moved seeking him, he came back seeking her—and they stood together in the doorway, he leaning against it a little, still feeling the flay of the fingers that had crippled him, looking up to the sky in which their help had come.

The crowd found its voice again. Cries and squeals of consternation and terror came like a sudden gust of storm from the gathered people.

The guard outside on the balcony at the end of the hall tore aside the curtains violently, and pointing upward shouted madly to their prince, and he moved to them slowly, and stood there looking out—and the priests huddled, blubbering and jabbering strickenly, behind him.

"See," Lucilla whispered, "see! They are circling lower and lower! Is it true, Basil? Are we saved?"

"Yes, Lucilla," he told her, in a voice that scarcely would sound, "we are saved." He repeated it, and his voice rang through the place. The Raja heard.

"Oh, thank God! Thank God!" Lucilla moaned. "I shall see my babies again!" she sobbed. She swayed, almost fainting, but Traherne caught her, and held her leaning on him, as he leaned on the portal.

Was their Goddess performing another great miracle for her favored people? Were her great rocs flinging them more white goats to gore at her feet, the people wondered, *"Oo-ae, Oo-ae!"* Was it portend of fortune or portend of doom?

"So," the Raja said to the English woman and man, "the Major lied like a gentleman! Good old Major! I didn't think he had it in him."

An excited guard called his attention to something, and the Raja looked out again to where the man motioned. He stood watching, looking down from the

balcony, gave an order, at which several of the soldiers hurried away, then turned and went to them who still were his prisoners. "One of the machines has landed," he told Traherne casually. "An officer is coming this way—he looks a mere boy."

"The conquerors of the air have all been mere boys," Dr. Traherne asserted.

The Raja smiled. "I have given orders," he said, "that he shall be brought here unharmed. Perhaps I had better receive him with some ceremony—"

He went slowly back to his glittering chair of sovereign state, sat himself down on it cross-legged, and settled his wonderful robes carefully about him, commanded his priests to, and they ranged themselves near him. And the Raja wondered if ever again he'd sit on the throne, his almost from birth, the throne his fathers had sat on and ruled from for long years. But the man was game. Give him his due.

"You said just now, Dr. Traherne," he remarked after a moment, "that you were saved. Are you so certain of that?"

"Certain?" Traherne echoed. His inflection was question, but even more it was retort and proud assertion, and his tired eyes glowed. And the woman whose hand clung in his felt the warmth of his fingers.

"How many men does each of these hummingbirds carry?" Rukh queried skeptically.

"Probably two or three," Traherne admitted, "a D. H. 10 can carry six to eight people but—"

Rukh interrupted. "I counted six planes—say at the outside twenty to thirty men. Even my toy army can cope with that number."

The clamor outside was indescribable now. The Raja translated it correctly, and gave a word of com-

mand to the priest guarding a door, and the priest, with trembling hands threw it open wide.

An English boy sauntered in—three of Rukh's soldiers half escorting, half guarding him. A fair, sunny-faced, blue-eyed youngster, trim and straight in his khaki-drill, the shoes below his "slacks" shining like polished, brown glass, two stripes on his epaulets, his black tie beautifully done, one yellow wisp of curl almost coquettishly peeping from under his immaculate service cap, and an avenue of ribbons cutting across his tunic—the blue, white and yellow of the G. S., the rainbow of the Victory, the red, white and blue of the 1914-15, of course, but the white and purple diagonals of the D. F. C. were there too, and the tiny rosette on the blue, dark-red and blue of his D. S. O. told that he had won it doubly. And he looked, as he was, a "mother's boy" and no end of a wag. Truly, "the conquerors of the air have all been mere boys"!

"Who are you, sir?" the Raja demanded.

"One moment." The English boy threw the word crisply over his shoulder to the bedizened figure sitting cross-legged and sovereign on its bedizened throne, and crossed to his countryman and woman, and saluted—the R. A. F. do not uncover.

Lucilla held out both her hands—they had met before at Delhi and at Simla. She was afraid to speak, almost afraid to look, lest she welcome him with a torrent of womanish tears.

"Mrs. Crespin!" the young pilot said, as he took the hands she gave. "I'm very glad we're in time. Dr. Traherne, I presume? And," when they had shaken hands gravely, "Major Crespin?" he asked.

"Shot whilst transmitting our message," Traherne told him.

"I'm so sorry, Mrs. Crespin," the boy said gravely. "By whom?" he demanded of Traherne.

Traherne pointed silently to the throne-seated Raja, who was watching quite impassively.

But Rukh spoke now. "I am sorry," he said, drawling his clear voice lazily, "to interrupt these effusions, but—"

"Who are you, sir?" The English lad's voice barked something like a gun.

"I am the Raja of Rukh," the prince replied. "And you?"

"Flight-Lieutenant Cardew," the boy-pilot said formally. "I have the honor to represent His Majesty, the King-Emperor."

Rukh looked uninterested. "The King-Emperor? Who is that, pray? We live so out of the world here, I don't seem to have heard of him," he lied.

"You will in a minute, Raja," the youth muttered back, "if you don't instantly hand over his subjects."

"His subjects?" The Raja seemed puzzled. "Ah," he exclaimed not unindifferently, but as if a light had broken in, "I see you mean the King of England. What terms does His Majesty propose?"

"We make no terms with cut-throats," Cardew snapped. "If I do not signal," he added, looking at the watch on his wrist, "your submission within three minutes of our landing—" If he finished his sentence, no one heard it.

A great slithering noise crashed down from the air, and all Rukh seemed to rock from the shock of a sudden explosion.

"Ah!" the Raja said idly. "Bombs!"

"Precisely," Cardew confirmed him, as cool as he.

"I fancied," Rukh remarked, "your Government af-

fected some scruple as to the slaughter of innocent civilians."

"There has been no slaughter—as yet," the Flight-Lieutenant returned. "That bomb fell in the ravine, where it could do no harm. So will the next one—"

The slithering, ripping sound again! It brayed nearer, heavier this time. And the explosion felt to have shattered the Kingdom of Rukh to tatters. The great hall rocked. Its horrid, heavy tapestries bellied and sagged like the wind-driven sails of a storm-buffeted ship.

The two Englishmen and the white-faced Englishwoman neither started nor stirred, nor did the Raja of Rukh. But the priests huddled together like frightened sheep, and the poor simple people out in the courtyard wailed like cattle in torment.

"—but the third"—the young airman went easily on, when he could expect to be heard—"well, if you're wise, you'll throw up the sponge, and there won't be a third."

But the Raja of Rukh *was* game. "Throw up the sponge, Lieutenant—?" he drawled indolently. "I didn't quite catch your name?"

"Cardew." The boy was brief.

"Ah, yes. Lieutenant Cardew. Why on earth should I throw up the sponge, Mr. Cardew? Your comrades up yonder can no doubt massacre quite a number of my subjects—a brave exploit!—but when they've spent their thunderbolts, they'll have just to fly away again—if they can. A bomb may drop on this temple, you say? In that case, you and your friends"—he inclined his head towards them graciously—"will escort me—in fragments—to my last abode. (Or should we say, *next* abode—interesting question.)

Does that prospect allure you? I call your bluff, Lieutenant Cardew."

Cardew looked again at his watch, and grinned—significantly: a public-schoolboy grin—and, as if it had known his grin for its cue, a third bomb screamed and hit and burst: England's anger weltering into the very bowels of the Kingdom of Rukh.

It was very near. It was blastingly loud.

The people shrieked. Save the idols and the three English none there was calm save the man cross-legged on the throne. From courtyard, temples and castle came a sorry chorus of terror and despair. Even the cattle in mat-sheds and byres bleated and cried, and wild jungle things off on mountains scurried and were afraid. The people shrieked, and the priests rushed to their master and flung themselves down at his feet in panic-stricken supplication. He hesitated for a moment, then, with a shrug half-indulgent, half contempt, continued to the English airman, "My priests, however, have a superstitious dread of these eggs of the Great Roc. They fear injury to the Sacred Image. For myself, I am always averse to bloodshed. You may, if you please, signal to your squadron commander my acceptance of your terms."

"I thought you would come to reason," Cardew returned, as he shook out the flag he carried, and hurried across the courtyard to where the white beam of a searchlight cut down between the great Green Goddess and her shivering, stark-eyed people.

"This comes of falling behind the times," the Raja said with a sigh not untinged with blasé amusement. "If I had had anti-aircraft guns—"

"Thank your stars you hadn't," Traherne told him.

Cardew came back from the execution-ground. "All

clear for the moment, Raja," he said. "You have no further immediate consequences to fear."

"What am I to conclude from your emphasis on 'immediate'?" Rukh asked lazily.

"I need scarcely remind you, sir," the boy said coldly, "that you can only hand over the body of one of your prisoners."

"Major Crespin," the Raja retorted, "murdered a faithful servant of mine. His death at my hands was a fair act of war."

"His Majesty's Government will scarcely view it in that light," Cardew remarked.

"His Majesty's Government," Rukh said haughtily, "has to-day, I believe, taken the lives of three kinsmen of mine. Your side has the best transaction by four lives to one."

Flight-Lieutenant Cardew ended the argument with a contemptuous lift of his broad, young shoulder. "Will you assign us an escort through that crowd?" he demanded.

"Certainly," the Raja replied smoothly. And at a word from him an officer of his regular troops hurried out. "The escort will be here in a moment, Flight-Lieutenant."

The Raja of Rukh rose and went to Mrs. Crespin. He stood a moment looking at her quietly. Then he said, including Traherne by his manner, "It only remains for me to speed the parting guest. I hope we may one day renew our acquaintance"—he said pointedly to Lucilla Crespin—"oh, not here,"—in reply to her shudder—"I plainly foresee that I shall have to join the other Kings in Exile. Perhaps we may meet at Homburg or Monte Carlo, and talk over old times. Ah, here is the escort."

As the aeroplane rose in the gathering dusk, Lucilla Crespin turned her face away from the Kingdom of Rukh. But Dr. Traherne fixed his eyes on castle and temple as long as the sight of them held.

Neither was thinking of the other as their rescue-ship rose and clove the air—the man and woman so terribly, so irrevocably betrothed. She had no thought now but of two children to whom she was going—hers only now. And Traherne was thinking of a boy at Harrow he had greatly respected.

Rukh turned back into the hall as the English left it. He strolled across to the throne his blood had owned for so many ages, and stood regarding it for a long time. He sighed, then laughed—a little sadly—in the hideous face of the Goddess that backed the throne, drew his case from the pouch in his jeweled sleeve, and lit a cigarette at the sacred brazier, drew its first fragrant whiff, standing there before his well-nigh lost throne, and went slowly out onto the balcony.

When the plane rose slowly up from Rukh, the Raja still stood on the balcony—and he watched it out of sight.

"Well, well," he said, to the fresh cigarette he was lighting, "she'd probably have been a damned nuisance."

THE END